Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 4, January 2016
Pp. 11-18

The Refugees' Predicament: A Select Study of Indian Fiction

*–V Pala Prasada Rao**

Abstract

The paper seeks to explore how democratic countries in the Indian Sub-continent try to appropriate power in their own clandestine ways in order to engineer thought control and it is held that it is as vicious and blatant as in the authoritarian countries. To acclimatize the Hindus and to empower the Muslims through its discriminatory laws as shown in Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* (1993), the government devised all ways to employ all state machinery to hush minorities. In fact, the lunatic fringe ran amuck during the fateful days of rampage of holy places as mentioned in the novel. It is common knowledge that some individuals, mostly self-seeking politicians, play upon the emotional chords of mobs in order to gain political leverage. Murad Ali in *Tamas* (1987) Master Tara Singh, Jinnah and Congress leaders in *Cracking India* (1993) Ram Charan Gupta and Bhushan Sarma in *Riot* (2001) and the Muslim political leaders in *Lajja* are all set to foment tensions and fish in the troubled waters.

Keywords: Genocide, partition, trauma, minority, refugees, demolition.

In his work on *Necessary Illusions* (1989), Noam Chomsky while documenting the history of propaganda and other sinister designs of the State observes that it seeks to control the thoughts and opinions without consent of its citizens. Thought control is generally associated with totalitarian countries, the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Cuba etc. But democratic countries like Bangladesh in their own clandestine ways engineer thought control and it is as vicious and blatant as in the authoritarian countries. In order to acclimatize the Hindus and to empower the Muslims through its discriminatory laws as shown in Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* (1993), the government uses all its machinery. The blatant acts, intended to confiscate Hindus' property, the mushrooming of madrasas, "a pretty sizeable" budgetary allocation to Islamic religious institutions, the army's villainies against the Hindus, the nonchalance of the police, the gradual Islamization of State polity, all degrade Hindus as second citizens. As a consequence, noxious communal elements enter state machinery. It is common knowledge that

* *Associate Professor, Jagarlamudi Kuppuswamy Choudary College, Guntur - 522006, Andhra Pradesh. Email: prasadarao.jkccollege@gmail.com*

some individuals, mostly self-seeking politicians play upon the emotional chords of mobs in order to gain political leverage. Murad Ali in *Tamas,* Master Tara Singh, Jinnah and Congress leaders in *Cracking India*, Ram Charan Gupta and Bhushan Sarma in *Riot* and the Muslim political leaders in *Lajja* are all set to foment tensions and fish in the troubled waters. Murad Ali, a Muslim Leaguer, for instance, is behind the murderous wrath of the mob as he got a pig slain and thrown in the precincts of a mosque. Ram Charan Gupta is on the prowl to work up the Hindus during the Ram-Sita Poojan by making inflammatory speeches. Once incited, the mobs imbued with fanaticism, can wreck vengeance without remorse. As the SP, Gurinder Singh in *Riot* puts it: "The mobs want only one thing. Revenge" (Tharoor 134).

I

With the announcement of partition, the Hindus and the Sikhs of Sialkot in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* fear the visitation of prehistoric monster. The novelist brings the crudeness and panic it accompanies before the reader's mind. While the Hindus shut themselves in their homes bemoaning their lot, the Muslims want to show off their strength to the Hindu traders by taking a procession through the Hindu streets. The procession stops outside the entrance to the street: "It was a wild sight. The mob was in transport, which exceeded panic or hysteria …. The bazaar was a sea of heads. They were split up into many small groups, and before each group there were two of three drummers… Many of them were dancing the Bhangra, the Punjabi dance of victory. The drummers hit wildly at the drums with their sticks, and the dancers bent forward and bent backward and swing on their toes. And frequently the drummers and the dancers stopped. And together they shouted, 'Pakistan, Zindabad. Long live Pakistan. The din that ensued was deafening. They were in a madness of the purest kind" (Nahal 72). Their xenophobia for India is well articulated since they regard India belongs to Hindus. Hence, they are intent on airing their grievances on the local Hindus, their fellow countrymen.

In *Tamas* too, the novelist Bhisham Sahni gives a graphic picture of riotous mob whose drumbeats make Harnam Singh and his wife shudder at the thought the ensuing violence. They flee their ancestral home as slogans "Ya Ali" and "Allah-o-Akbar" reach their ears. But their son, Iqbal Singh, who lives in another village, is waylaid by a Muslim mob. While he is running for life through the dark fields, he hopes to evade the mob's attention. But the unrelenting mob chases him. It pelts a hail of stones at him and feels self-congratulatory when the Sikh, cowed into submission, agrees to change over to Islam. The relish on their faces and sentiments of righteousness almost convince one that it is an act of pedagogy. The group feels an exhilaration of power that compensates for its everyday helplessness. It targets not the gangster, or a hoodlum. The petty worker will do. The mob's sense of violence and being violated is intense.

In the same novel, the irate Hindu youth brigades are afflicted with siege mentality. Their leader, Ranvir, pacing outside his arsenal, urges his "warriors" to pounce upon the enemy – a Muslim. Accordingly, they chance to find a portly Muslim hawker and "a Hindu warrior" plunges his knife into his belly with little regrets for killing an innocent one.

A motive that has nothing to do with religious fervour is more often behind the attacks on minorities. It is greed, a simple, often carefully orchestrated effort to grab the lands, shops and wealth of their neighbours. Sahni debunks the squalor of politicians, who under the garb of some political party lead the mob. Led by Ashraf and Latif, the mob loots Harnam Singh's teashop. Harnam Singh and his wife reflect: "The rioters would not chase them. They had no use of their lives. It was the shop they wanted. It meant so much loot (Sahni 158). In another village, the Sikhs of Sayyedpur, when their ammunition has been exhausted, come to terms with the Muslims who demand two lakhs. When the Sikhs start haggling, the Muslims aspiring for much plunder, break off the negotiations for they yearn to rob the Sikhs of all their wealth. Here it is pertinent to quote Frantz Fanon who observes in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanize them" (13).

II

Unable to stand the ferocity of onslaughts of the marauders, the atavistic instinct to escape takes over the minorities. The instinct to migrate to the land of safety is very perceptible during the division of India. It is not just a brief trip to another village those helpless minorities are making. Indeed, theirs is a protracted trek of the uprooted, a journey with no return across hundreds of miles; each mile menaced with exhaustion, starvation, cholera, attacks against which there is often no defence. In their utter helplessness, they may be likened to those victimized by colonialism portrayed in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* or even worse.

Partition has wrought havoc on peasants' lives. Their only life has been the fields they work laboriously. Most of them do not know what a viceroy is, and have never been bothered with issues like partition or boundary lines or even the freedom in whose name they have been plunged into despair. Stalking from one end of the horizon to the other is the remorseless sun compounding their miseries. In *Tamas,* Harnam Singh feels an alien in a single shattering moment when the rioters have plundered and burnt the shop down. They would have killed him but for the loot his shop fetched for them. Walking across the fields under the veil of darkness, they dread some ambush. "In a few hours the darkness would fade, exposing them to the pitiless eyes, like a woman suddenly finding herself, naked, with nowhere to go" (Sahni 158). There are thousands of others like them who are wandering about in the countryside in search of shelter.

The people have never cherished the idea of abandoning their homes and hearths for good. Bapsi Sidhwa, employing interrogation brings to light their utter misery: "Where can the scared Muslim villagers go? How can they abandon their ancestors' graves every inch of their land they own, their other kind? How will they ever hold up their heads again?" (Sidhwa 70) Similarly, Lala Kanshi Ram in *Azadi* undergoes the same turmoil when he is uprooted, along with other Hindus and Sikhs. His predicament is like Sudhamoy's in *Lajja*, who develops natural fascination for the land he was born and raised. With a gush of feelings, he licks the land.

The rural population of Punjab is not at all prepared for the big holocaust, as the partition turns out to be big destabilizing factor in the smug and contented self-sufficiency of rural life. The army trucks arrive to Pir Pindo to evacuate the Muslim villages. Ranna in *Cracking India* is confused by the flurry of activity going on at the village: "Solders, holding guns with bayonets sticking out of them, were directing the villagers. The villagers were shouting and running to and fro, carrying on their heads charpoys heaped with their belongings. Some were herding their calves and goats towards the trucks. There were dumping their household articles in the middle of the lanes in their scramble to climb into the lorries". (Sidhwa 205)

The holocaust that follows the demolition of the Babri mosque is unreasoned in savagery forcing the Hindus to leave Bangladesh. In *Lajja* Sudhamoy is aggrieved by the sad turn of events taking place in Bangladesh. His young daughter was kidnapped and his son shows signs of psychological trauma. He feels insecure, forlorn and unprotected and his wife is certain that Bangladesh is no country for Hindus. He has forgone many precious things for the privilege of allowing him to stay in the country he was born. Towards the end of the novel, the awful reality dawns upon him when he has come upon his son who seems to fear safety in his nightmare. Sudhamoy makes up his mind to leave for India with a great burden in his heart.

After the announcement of partition, there is the unparalleled tide of human misery washing across the face of the Punjab. The enormity of anguish and suffering is almost beyond human competence to imagine or the human spirits' capacity to endure. The ant-like herds of human beings are walking over open country slipping in droves, while the fires of the villages burning all around them.

It is only on the ground, however, among those wretched creatures, that the awfulness of what is happening becomes apparent. Eyes and throats raw with dust, feet burnished by stones, tortured by hunger and thirst, enrobed in a stench of urine, sweat and defecation, the refugees wade dumbly forward. They have to endure their burden not for a mile or two but scores of miles for days on end. In *Azadi*, the column in which the protagonist Kanshi Ram makes for India is ten miles in length with twenty thousand people. The trains would become the best hope of feeling for the refugees. For tens of thousands of others, they would become rolling coffins. In many a Punjabi village they provide the same frenzied scenes. Waiting for days, the crowd would throw itself on the doors and windows of each wagon in a concert of tears and strikes until each cluster of humans enfolded each compartment like "a horde of flies swarming over a sugar cube". While setting out for Delhi by a train Kanshi Ram comes upon a scene of stampede as hundreds of Hindus and Sikh refugees tried to board the Delhi train. "Hot words were exchanged and there were also scuffles as they struggled with each other" (Nahal 328).

As the pace of the flight in both directions grow, those trainloads of wretched refugees have become the prime targets of assault on both sides. They are ambushed while they stand in stations or in the open country. In *Train to Pakistan*, the Muslims in Mano Majra are dazed at the predatory advances of the Sikhs in the surrounding villages. But the unrelenting Sikhs refuse to leave the Muslims unscathed and a wire

rope across the bridge is stretched in order to massacre the Muslims sitting on the roof of the train.

While violence has affected everyone, Sidhwa seems to show that the Sikhs stand out in this respect. She does not show a train massacre as she did in her earlier novel *The Bride* earlier, but she describes one briefly through the eyes of Ice-candy man: "A train from Gurudaspur has just come in… everyone in it is dead. They are all Muslims. There are no young women among the dead. Only two gunny-bags full of women's breasts" (Sidhwa 149). In *Azadi* too, the same ghastly scenes are reported and the protagonist takes it to heart when he comes to know that his daughter and son-in-law were killed in train tragedy. The novelist, Chaman Nahal's sister is done away with the same brutality and it prompts Nahal among other causes, to leave for India.

The trains of death, as they have become known, many an occasion spark off communal riots. As the refugees relate the grisly stories of horror, the majority of the community nourishes the will to retaliate. Ice-candy-man seethes with anger on learning the horrors and so would like to avenge those deaths, rapes and mutilations. He cannot get the murderers but he can get Sher Singh. Though Sher Singh has not committed the atrocities, he is made accountable for his community has perpetrated genocide against the Muslims.

In the beginning of partition holocaust, killing is an act of stray individuals, or of isolated, small groups of individuals, and though as yet there is no movement behind the violence to annihilate minorities belonging to Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. But in no time, the violence has grown to alarming proportions. More than murders it is the fires that are frightening and demoralizing. Sidhwa describes at length the Shalmi bazaar burning to ashes: "It is like gigantic fireworks on display … Trapped by the spreading flames the panicked Hindus rush in droves from one end of the street to the other. Many disappear down the smoking lanes. Some collapse in the street" (Sidhwa 137). In *Azadi* too, the grain market in Sialkot owned mostly by the Hindus is gutted in fire.

As communal virus strikes down people, they fall upon one another with the ferocity of cannibals intending to chase the minorities out of their own lands. In *Tamas*, the Hindus and Sikhs have pulled out of Muslim areas and the Muslims have evacuated from the Hindu and Sikh pockets. In *Azadi*, there is a mention about the Hindu population, which has been either driven out or completely exterminated. It is the show of strength and unable to withstand minorities run away from their own land. Running for life, Ranna in *Cracking India* comes upon a deserted village. Except the animals, lowing and bleating and wandering ownerless, there is no one residing in it. Later he watches the lurid scene of the mob of Sikhs and Hindus approaching the village. What happened to the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in 1947 was genocide or ethnic cleansing.

The treatment meted out to the Hindus in eastern Pakistan, later called Bangladesh, equally tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Unable to withstand torture and onslaughts on their life, the Hindus start pouring in into India. Sudhamoy in *Lajja* cannot prevail upon many Hindus not to migrate but they brush aside his pleas as they dread hooliganism.

The demolition of the Babri mosque has incurred the wrath of the Muslims and fearing assaults, the Hindus leave the country for good. The statistical information furnished by the novelist corroborates the fact that the Hindu population is on the decrease over the years: "In 33.1 per cent of the population of East Bengal was Hindu … In the early 1990s Hindus constituted around twenty per cent of the population" (Nasreen 10). It stands to reason that they have been driven out or else they, resenting the unfair treatment as aliens in their own land, move towards an uncertain address like hunted deer.

The plight of the refugees is excruciating for they cannot justify their presence even amongst their kith and kin. Kanshi Ram has hoped that the refugees would be given a fair treatment in India. When they knock at their relatives' doors, they have discovered that they are not welcome: "Some offered them tea. Some offered food. Yet none offered them shelter" (Nahal 325). The government's attitude is even more discouraging. To his dismay, the Area Custodian of Evacuee Property has demanded bribe for some refuge flat, which is beyond his means.

The story on the other side of the border is same. Initially the local inhabitants of Pakistan are kindly disposed towards the new arrivals from India calling them Muhajirs meaning migrants after the refugees who accompanied the Prophet Muhammad to Medina. However, once the fear of Hindu domination has gone, internal rivalries and tensions have emerged between the refugees and the local residents. The local residents resent the presence of the refugees. Towards the end of *Azadi*, Arun, the protagonist's son cycles fast as he fears a riot would break out: "If not the Muslims, the Punjabi refugees might be attacked" (Nahal 365). Embittered, they start indulging in acts of hooliganism. Thus the poor refugees meet with the similar fate in the aftermath of holocaust.

The truth about a communal riot has so many shades that it is rarely possible to define anything in black and white. However, when the so-called guardians turn into communal armies the whole order begins to crumble. Many innocent lives get destroyed or traumatized when the state presumes an entire community to be responsible for an untoward incident. The engineered mistrust between people of diverse faiths further consolidates with each riot. Here they are charged with the heinous crimes or guilt that the vast majority of them intensely abhor. As a result, they find their eyes lowered, their spirit crushed, forcrimes which they oppose no less than their neighbours. This labeling and blanket condemnation of people merely because of their identities – now a global phenomenon – is not confined to common people. It extends more dangerously to how states respond to riots, in effect holding the entire community guilty unless they prove their innocence. How this can destroy innocent lives forever is well illustrated starkly in the novels. They show that victimization and demonization of Muslims in the guise of investigation, is having a very serious psychological impact on the minds of not only the victims but also other members of the community. It leads a very strong sense of insecurity and alienation. Nasreen shows the discriminating attitude of the army against the Hindus. She also brings to light the stark communal mindset of officials and ministers of India during the demolition of the Babri mosque. "The entire drama had unfolded in the presence of high ranking officers and ministers … stood by without moving a muscle as the destruction of the mosque had continued" (Nasreen 2).

In *Riot* too there is a mention of excesses of the police directing ire against the Muslims in Zalilgarh. Mohammed Sarwar confirms the complicity of State: "The police response to a riot simply sows the seeds of the next one" (Tharoor 258). If authority is to be lenient to the communal elements, there must be a kind of waywardness or irregularity at its heart. But this should not be allowed to undo the law, thus jeopardizing its protection of the weak against the powerful. Human law should exemplify humanity. This is not a contradiction, which can escape, since it must resort to force to protect the powerless that take shelter beneath it.

The role of State to curtail communalism cannot be underestimated for one important reason. It has immense power for good or for evil. Moreover, in certain areas of life it alone can act. It alone can initiate action against malicious and provocative communal propaganda, vicious lies and rumour mongering. It alone can take preventive or punitive measures and punish the guilty as they generally cow down before State machinery. It can address the immediate task of containing the violence and tackling the serious humanitarian crisis. Those who have had to abandon home and hearth should be enabled to return. Transport links with the rest of the country need to be restored; thousands of people would be stranded in railway and bus stations and many other public places. Therefore the administration should react quickly after the first signs of trouble. Considering that there was a build-up of tensions over years, vulnerable areas ought to have been identified and adequate forces deployed. While talking about the might of the British, Richard in *Tamas* states that when the mob goes wild, Jackson, a British officer, "with just a revolver in his hand, chased a mob away single- handed" (Sahni 45). In the same novel, *Tamas*, the Muslim mob has to submit itself to the will of the Britishers who bring about a semblance of peace by sending an aeroplane and the mere sight of it makes the Sikh community see a ray of hope amidst rioting Muslim mobs. On seeing it, a Sikh "started dancing like a mad man" (Sahni 201). However, the novelist shows the connivance of State in watching violence without bothering about it. In many places overrun by violence, the forces were not visible at all! The deployment of forces seems to have come too late in the day. Richard is rather reluctant to initiate action against the warring communities for he conceives that a foreign ruler is safe when the natives are involved in fighting. When the riots spread he sees the need to curb violence lest the rationale of white man's burden should be misconstrued and their future at peril.

It is shown that only a national state, a state that is interested in national integration and nation-building can undertake the necessary administrative measures to minimize or stem in the tide of riots. Unlike the colonial power, a secular state can reduce and manage communal tensions and promote a secular outlook through its numerous channels. For decades since partition, there have been riots in many parts of the country. As Priscilla says in *Riot*: "Indian government has apparently become rather good at managing these riots" (Tharoor 21). Officials like Gurinder Singh and Lakshman act against all miscreants with firmness and they resolve to restore peace without firm manipulation. It is an outcome of genuine conviction and courage. They take punitive measures in a forthright manner against the criminals who have stabbed sweet Mohammed to death and despite pressures from some ministers who are able to pull

strings they stick to their guns. They respond by the book of law doing everything in their capacity, calling meetings of the two communities, advising restraint, registering strong criminal charges against rabid communalists energizing peace committees. The state should stop people from wreaking vengeance on each other. The mapping of stress-points on the basis of adequate intelligence inputs should be a priority.

The Collector, Lakshman is convinced of the "kind of affirmative action programme for India's underprivileged" (Tharoor 93). The long-term of the state, obviously, is to re-envision the riot-torn places where ascriptive identities do not disrupt civic relationships. The state needs to keep working on achieving the right balance of development activity. The key to this will be restoration of mutual trust. This should be based primarily on systematic measures to address fears over loss of ownership and concerns over denial of access to resources, development and means of livelihood. The Collector urges: "Let everyone feel they are as much Indian as everyone. Ensure that democracy protects the multiple identities of Indians, so that people feel you can be a good Muslim and a good Bihari and a good Indian all at once" (Tharoor 44-45). He has high faith in the resilience of Indian democracy.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill., Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Necessary Illusions.* London: Pluto, 1989. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin, 1961. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Methuen, 1987. Print.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1987. Print.
- Nahal, Chaman. *Azadi*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1979. Print.
- Nasreen, Taslima. *Lajja.* Trans. Tatul Gupta. New Delhi: Penguin, 1993. Print.
- Sahni, Bhisham. *Tamas*. Trans. Jai Rajan. New Delhi: Penguin, 1987. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chaito & Windows, 1993. Print.
- —-. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage, 1978. Print.
- Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Cracking India.* New York: Milkweed Publications, 1988. Print.
- Singh, Khushwant. *Train to Pakistan*. Bombay. India House Pvt. Ltd., 1975. Print.
- Tharoor, Shashi. *Riot*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2001. Print.

❑❑❑