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The Roots of Religious Intolerance: A Select Study of the Indian Novels

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Abstract

The paper seeks to explore how the lunatic fringe is hell-bent on whipping up communal frenzy. As evidenced in the novels, most of the communal leaders are rank practitioners of politics and therefore, foment trouble for one or other paltry reason. The Indian ethos, which has long been extolled, has been at stake in the last part of the second millennium. It has also witnessed, as evidenced in the novels, the animosity and rancour between the secular and communal forces each trying to outwit the other. The ideologues of communal leaders would always like to harp on the contradictions between Hindu - Muslim traditions. Some of the worth mentioning differences between them come handy for communalists to subvert popular discontent of economic oppression in the main. A few novels are pressed into service to substantiate the argument.

Keywords: Indian ethos, Communalism, Hindutva, Traditions, Economic discontent, Secularism, False consciousness

The chief engagement of the paper is to unravel the insidious relationship between the secular and the communal. The Indian ethos, which has long been extolled, has been at stake in the last part of the second millennium. It has also witnessed, as evidenced in the novels, the animosity and rancour between the secular and communal forces each trying to outwit the other.

The vicious votaries of communalism would always like to hark back to Hindu – Muslim riots, and the ubiquitous contradictions between the Islamic and Hindu traditions. Some of the important differences between them come handy for communalists to subvert popular discontent of economic oppression in the main. For instance, Islam is a religion with a founder, a revealed dogma and with a churchly establishment. It reposes faith in the prophet and the *Quran*. For the Hindu society, religion is a highly personal affair: "It is a religion", as Lakshman in Tharoor's *Riot*

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(2001) puts it, "without an established church or priestly papacy" (Tharoor 144). For Islam, the Creator stands apart from His creation, ordering and presiding over His work. To the Hindu, the Creator and creation are one and indivisible. As a result, the Hindu worships God in almost any form he chooses. To the Muslim, on the contrary, there is but one God. The *Quran* forbids the faithful to represent Him in any shape or form. Idols and idolatry to the Muslim are, therefore, abhorrent.

It goes without saying that the differences existing in different religions are peripheral in the sense they do not take on people's minds unless they are whipped up. Religious differences did explain a sense of separate religious and social identity but they failed to explain the genesis or persistence of a long-term socio-political phenomenon like communalism. Communalism was not inspired by religion nor was religion the object of communal politics. In other words, religion was not the underlying cause, whose removal was basic to tackling the communal problem. It is necessary in this respect to distinguish between religion as an ideology or a belief system and the ideology of religious identity. Consciousness of one's religion is also not communalism. In Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1979), Chaudhri Barkat Ali is intensely conscious of Islam: "He and his wife said namaaz, their prayer five times a day … visited the mosque nearby, gave alms to the poor and observed fasts through the entire month of ramadhan" (Nahal 102). He is not communal for he regards himself and his family as good Muslims because they believe in the unity of all religions.

Comprehending religious differences is often mind-boggling. In fact to understand communalism or the ideology of religious identity, one must go beyond the sphere of religion and explore the domains of economics and politics. In other words, religious difference was a basic element of communal ideology and politics and was used by the communalist as an organizing principle in mobilizing the masses. Using religious distinctions which were very real, and of which people were certainly conscious, the communalist created the false consciousness of religious identity and communal antagonism. Exploiting the religious identity for the purposes of communal antipathy against the Muslims, the leader from the city in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) has successfully instilled feelings of intense ill will in the minds of the Sikhs.

The dubious role of communal part is always flawed as they like to use religion as a decoy. In communalism, religion plays an entirely extraneous or vicarious role – the role of a mask is clearly brought out if one takes a look at the religious side of the communal leaders in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1988), Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* (1993) and Tharoor's *Riot* (2001). Murad Ali in *Tamas,* asks Nathu to slay a pig, and makes it a point to get the carcass of the pig thrown on the steps of a mosque. He is a Muslim Leaguer and seems to promote the interests of the Muslims. So is the case with Ram Charan Gupta and his "bigoted ilk". Being a Hindu he does not take pride in its diversity, in its openness and tolerance. The topics on which he waxes eloquent are Ram Sila Poojan programme, the sacred soil of civilization, minority appeasement, Hindutva, Hinduness of Taj Mahal and foreignness of Muslims. It is said about him as "an unsuccessful parliamentary candidate in the last elections; it's expected that he'll do better next time" (Tharoor 51). Ram Charan Gupta is hell-bent on fomenting communal

sentiments in order to derive maximum political mileage. He hones his speeches in such a way that they become rabidly inflammatory. To political leaders, who were communal, the religious appeal is simply an instrument in rabble rousing. This statement was truer of Jinnah.

It was Jinnah, among others, who popularized the idea of a narrower notion of Muslim nationhood that confined Indian Muslims to a truncated share of the heritage of their entire land. Unlike the Maulana, Jinnah: "… wore Savile Row suits, enjoyed his scotch and cigars, ate pork, barely spoke Urdu, and married a non-Muslim" (Tharoor 107). In fine, his miens and mind testify his irreligiosity.

One should be very compassionate and has to be cerebral to be secular as seen in the profiles of many secular leaders who are profoundly religious. The symbol of secularism among the Muslims is Maulana Abul Kalam Azad who was, in fact, a far more authentic representative of Indian Islam than Jinnah. Yet Jinnah claimed to speak for India's Muslims. He used Islam in a general sense as a banner and not in its religious functioning. On the other side, the very heterogeneous character of Hinduism made the Hindu communalist keep all religious aspects out of communal politics. Many staunch Arya Samajists, opposed to idolatry in any form, virtually became cow worshippers in their communal practice. V.D. Savarkar, the high priest and theoretician of communalism was a rationalist and a practicing atheist. It was part of the great tragedy of the country as Mohammed Sarwar in *Riot* observes: "… that it was Jinnah and V.D. Savarkar who triumphed over the secular persons leading to much communal disharmony" (108). Like their leaders, most of the middle class Hindus and Muslims, who formed the social base of communalism, were hardly religious. Murad Ali, Lakshmi Narain, Hayat Baksh, Master Devbrat, Ranvir etc in *Tamas*; Ice-candy-man in *Cracking India* (1988); Captain Rahmat-Ulla Khan in *Azadi*; Bhushan Sarma in *Riot* and Akhtarujjaman in *Lajja,* to name a few, belong to middle class stratum of society were not religious-minded. What W.C. Smith in *Modern Islam in India* (1963) has said of communal Muslims is equally true of communalists in other religions. "For many middle-class Muslims, communalism is the most important part of their religion. Without communalism many of these Muslims too would be Muslim in little more than name. It is exceedingly difficult to discover what, if anything, they mean "Islam" except the Muslim community and loyalty to it. Usually they do not govern their lives by their religion in any sense, their decisions are not influenced by it, and their ideals and objectives do not derive from it. Often they do not know very much about their religion in any other sense. There is little concern with God; with personal salvation; with morality; with worship" (Smith 203-204). The characters of Jinnah and Ram Charan amply evidenced in Tharoor's *Riot* can best illustrate the fact.

In *Riot,* Tharoor's mouthpiece seems to be an IAS officer, Lakshman who seeks to undermine the ubiquitous but fake religious differences creeping in the minds of people. Lakshman, in the novel, feels that religion is one of the sources of division breeding communalism. He observes: "The sense of religious chauvinism that transforms itself into bigotry" (Tharoor 44). He believes that intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit. He gives umpteen

examples of communal bigotry and communal clashes in her history – Hindu-Muslim, Muslim-Sikh, Sikh-Hindu, Hindu-Christian etc. Ethics, which should be the kernel of religious code, has been carefully removed especially during the extreme phase of communalism. In Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Iqbal, a better philosopher than social worker, finds religion shallow and wanting in all values. He believes that India "devoid of religious faith had been constipated a lot of humbug" (194). He denounces that the lunatic fringe fails to appreciate ethos and they confine themselves to the façade of religion. He surmises: "Take religion. For the Hindu, it means little besides caste and cow protection. For the Muslim, circumcision and kosher meat. For the Sikh, long hair and hatred of the Muslims" (Singh 195). Lakshman believes that there is no religion that was founded on intolerance – and there is no religion that does not value the sanctity of human life.

Religion with the soulless world could only be the cause of barriers creating disharmony and discord. Communalism was in this sense also a sleight of hand. Though relying on religion for communal demarcation, it had hardly any religion in it. The communalists used religion to appeal to an existing consciousness of religious demarcation to create quite another type of fresh consciousness of political demarcation. They used religion merely as a grouping and a separating principle for political purposes thereby creating a false consciousness. They hardly have any other use of religion.

Tharoor's secular views expressed with aplomb and reason, find their lucid expression in Mohammed Sarwar's interpretation of history. He sheds much light on hegemony and elevation as he constructs history. He is convinced that the arena of history is mired in controversies most of which were sparked off by the fanatics. He sees the need to hail composite religiosity and to applaud the syncretic culture of Hindus and Muslims. But the complicated way whereby Ram Charan marshals the oral tradition of India makes the historian's job more challenging.

The medieval period had witnessed a certain cultural rapprochement and the gradual development of common culture among the upper and middle class Hindus and Muslims in different parts of the country. At popular plane, popular religions with their mutual influences – corrupted or unorthodox – formed together in social and cultural spheres. There was adaptation by the high religions to a variety of tribal and local cultures and beliefs. As a result, they carried with them into the new religion old religious and social beliefs and practices. The popular religions were highly eclectic in their beliefs and practices. The common popular culture and ways of life tended to prevail. Marriage and other social practices tended to be uniform, or at least mutually influenced. Various syncretic cults had developed in different parts of the country. Hindus and Muslims shared common saints and Pirs, dargah and other holy places. In *Cracking India* the narrator-character Lenny goes along with Imam Din to Dera Tek Singh on Baisakhi, the day that celebrates the birth of the Sikh religion and of the wheat harvest. Lenny narrates: "From on top of Imam Din's head I see the other groups of villagers converging on Dera Tek Singh – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh … The men go to the Baisakhi Fair every year: before Ranna was born before his great grandfather was born" (Sidhwa 105).

The hallmark of tolerance can be traced in the local traditions of Indian across the nation. For instance, the Mano Majrans – Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim – venerate the local deity, the deo "whenever they are in special need of blessing" (Singh 11). In *Riot*, the History Professor, Mohammed Sarwar gives an account of a man called Syed Salar Masaud Ghazi who was "worshipped by both the communities" (Tharoor 64). However, the social and religious reform movements, especially their revivalist wings, tended to reverse this trend. They attacked popular religious beliefs and practices as irrational and corrupted and debased forms of the original faith. What Professor Mohammed Sarwar in *Riot* elucidates is worth-mentioning: "Extremists of both stripes have sought to discredit the secular appeal of Ghazi Miyan" (Tharoor 66). Similarly, Lala Kanshi Ram, the protagonist of *Azadi,* and devout Arya Samajist harps back to the past – "the glory of the Vedic civilization" (Nahal 17) – when Indian culture, as he thinks, was unsullied. Thus the emphasis of the movements was on the purity of faith and the purging of popular religions of the so-called 'alien accretions'. Purity meant making religion more fundamentalist and less universal. The ideologues returned to the distant and divergent traditions – traditions of periods when Hindus and Muslims have not known each other and which therefore separated and widened the religious, cultural and social gulf between them. Thus, returning to the pristine purity of Hinduism and Islam and the purification of religious rites meant condemnation of religious syncretism and checking the process of the evolution of a composite culture initiated during the medieval period. This led to the creation of a greater distance between religions and people, producing a sense of cultural and social exclusiveness. The effects of the movements were far-reaching. For instance, in *Lajja*, Sudhamoy remembered a time in 1946 when the hostilities between the Hindus and Muslim had been high. After eating sweetmeats at a shop he had asked the shopkeeper for water. "The word he had used was *paani*, not the word, *jal* he would have normally used". (Nasreen 180). In this context of revivalism a fairly long extract from Beni Prasad's *The Hindu Muslim Questions* (1941) on the communal issue is very apt:

> Revivalism weaned away the half-converts from the lingering Hindu beliefs and practices. On the other hand, the Hindu sub-castes, which had adopted Muslim ways of living, gravitated towards Hindu revivalism or modernism. Hindus and Muslims alike began to give up many practices which they had imbibed from one another and which had formed bridges between the two communities. Many areas of common life and thought have thus been restricted and many meeting places obliterated ... It imparts its tone in literature, favouring the elimination of Sanskrit terms from Urdu and that of Arabic terms from Hindi. (Prasad 25-26)

Reformist and revivalist movements also spread orthodoxy where heterodoxy had prevailed earlier. Even if they did not spread greater commitment to religion they spread religious consciousness of being Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. Though often not communal by themselves, they made the middle classes and the masses more susceptible to communal propaganda. The tensions and insecurities brought about by the widening inequalities cause people to take refuge in irrational ideologies – communalism, regionalist

demands, cultural movements etc. This explains why many people appear to have become susceptible to social tendencies that tend to blame some imagined other. The reason behind this is that the real perpetrators of the problem appear too large or too remote to be confronted. So antagonistic energies are diverted to those nearer home. They are easier to flight. Thus any group can be treated as the "other" and becomes the object of hatred and violence. In Indonesia too the response was taking the form of Islamic reaction against Christians. There is, in fact, a miasma of confusion about the real problems and real culprits. Politicians across the subcontinent have the proclivity to go any extent to come to power. They groom vote banks, addressing specific needs of religious communities. Shashi Tharoor in *Riot* drives this point home: "Politicians of all faiths across India seek to mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities" (Tharoor 145). Thus the contrary pulls of the secular and the communal culminate in the loss of the ethos distinctive of the Indian subcontinent thereby bringing about alienation between the communities culminating blatant mutual intolerance.

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