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The Representation of Partition Violence in *Tamas*

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Abstract: Bhisham Sahni who personally experienced Partition and witnessed communal violence during Partition and after in post-Partition India was persuaded to re-examine them in his Hindi novel *Tamas* (1973). Partition is thought to be the consequence of the fatal idolatry of religious politics and the years around Partition as the years of *tamas* (darkness) of communalism. *Tamas* as a Partition narrative depicts innocent and common people in the middle of communal frenzy and violence. It does not see any justification for communal violence nor offer any historical explanation. Instead of arousing communal sentiments, the novelist tries to reaffirm the pre-Partition days of harmony between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India. Though his fictional representation of Partition lacks a multifaceted perspective, *Tamas* is a significant literary endeavour in terms of rethinking the problem of communalism in Indian society and politics. Its imaginative depiction of reality appears more authentic than the realistic one.

Keywords: communal violence, history, migration, Partition, representation, refugees, rehabilitation, riot, secularism.

Introduction

Bhisham Sahni (1915–2003), born in the Arya Samaj family in Rawalpindi and educated in English literature from Lahore, left on a last train for Amritsar on August 14, 1947. His ancestral home and of all Sahni's was Bhera near Jhelum in Shahpur district of Punjab (now Pakistan) where there was a historic battle fought between King Porus and the Greek Emperor Alexander (Kalpana Sahni, par. 3). The people of Bhera called themselves Bherochis. Largest and richest clan in Bhera,



most Sahnis had moved to Rawalpindi. Bhisham visited Bhera only once on a relative's marriage which decades later was followed only by his daughter Kalpana Sahni. Bhisham's ancestors had also lived in Kabul at some point. His father Babu Haribanslal Sahni had moved to Peshawar for a business but due to the incidents of attacks and looting by the Kabali-Pathans, the family came to Rawalpindi (Kashyap 277). After Partition, they moved to Srinagar and from there settled in Delhi. They also kept moving between Delhi and Bombay and spent some years abroad in London and Moscow too.

Bhisham wrote in Hindi novels like *Jharokhe* (1967), *Kadiyan* (1971), *Tamas* (1973), *Basanti* (1980), *Maiyadas ki Mardi* (1988, set in Bhera), *Kunto* (1993) and *Neeloo, Neelima, Neelofar* (2000); short-story collections like *Bhagya Rekha* (1953), *Pahla Path* (1956), *Bhatakti Raakh* (1966), *Patariyan* (1973), *Vangchoo* (1978), *Shobhayatra* (1981), *Nishachar* (1983), *Pali* (1989) and *Daiyan* (1998); plays like *Hanush* (1977), *Kabira Khara Baazar Mein* (1981), *Madhavi* (1984), *Muawaze* (1993), *Rang De Basanti Chola* (1996) and *Alamgir* (1999); children's writing like *Gulel Ka Khel* (1980) and *Vaapasi* (1988); an autobiography *Aaj Ke Ateet* (2003); and a biography of his brother *Balraj, My Brother* (1981). When Bhisham moved to the USSR and joined the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow as a translator, he translated more than twenty-five Russian books into Hindi such as Leo Tolstoy's *Ressurrection*, *The Kreutzer Sonata* and *The Death of Ivan Ilych*; and Chingiz Aitmatov's *My First Teacher*; and many other literary works from Hindi (Yash Pal, Amarkant and Kamleshwar) and from Punjabi (Nav Tej Singh and Gurdial Singh) into English. He also acted in films like *Mohan Joshi Hazir Ho!* (d. Saeed Akhtar Mirza, 1984), *Kasba* (d. Kumar Shahani, 1991), *Little Buddha* (d. Bernardo Bertolucci, 1993) and *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (d. Aparna Sen, 2002), and the TV serial *Tamas*, adapted by Govind Nihalani in 1987 and telecast on Doordarshan in 1988. He worked with Indian People's Theatre Association during 1946–1950 and All India Progressive Writers' Association (as general secretary) during 1975–1985. For his contribution to literature and society, he was conferred the Soviet Land Nehru Award in 1983 and the Padma Bhushan in 1998 among others.

As a writer, Bhisham Sahni committed to the human and secular values of India. He upheld moral and political assumptions about his life and writing. According to Alok Bhalla, the two rules



of thought and action that governed his long life were to never humiliate anyone and to never give into religious and sectarian hatred (*Bhisham* 9). These rules germinated from his experiences of life at a critical juncture of history. He had personally witnessed the violence of Partition. He had to abandon everything he had when he left Rawalpindi by the last train for Amritsar on 14 August, 1947. He almost exclaimed “what more can happen now!” (Kurup 17) He remembered riots, arson and murder which gripped people at the time of total abeyance of social and political reason. Innocent people were caught unprepared to deal with the enormity of violence that accompanied the demand for the division of India. For him, the Partition years were devoid of any meaning, logic and purpose. Therefore, they were the years of *tamas* (darkness) of communalism. ‘Tamas’ is the basest of the three *gunas* (*satva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) in Hindu philosophy. Bhisham chose the title of his novel from the Rigvedic *rucha: asato ma sadgamay/tamaso ma jyotirgamay/mrityorma amrutamgamay!* He insisted that Partition was a mistake. Partition was a specific historical event which was the result of singular moment and ideological passions, the result of fatal idolatry of religious politics (Bhalla, *Bhisham* 9). The horrors of Partition so shocked Bhisham that he arrived to the conclusion that as people we did not have the capacity for decency and freedom. The series of communal riots in post-Independent India, particularly the Bhiwandi riots of 1971, reminded him of Rawalpindi riots and persuaded him to re-examine the violence of Partition in his novel *Tamas*. He had visited riot affected Bhiwandi with Balraj Sahni, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and I. S. Johar. He regarded *Tamas* as his very life and the story of an Indian tragedy which repeats itself (Kurup 19). If we read his *Aaj Ke Ateet*, some of the incidents narrated in the novel seem autobiographical, based on his personal encounters. The present article examines with minute textual details Bhisham Sahni’s fictional history of Partition and violence in *Tamas*.

Partition and Violence in *Tamas*

Tamas was first published in Hindi in 1973 and was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976. Following this, it was translated into English first by Jai Ratan in 1988 with an introduction by Govind Nihalani, then in 2001 by Bhisham Sahni himself and again by Daisy Rockwell in 2016. As Rockwell notes in her introduction, she encountered the problems of translation in Ratan’s



translation such as frequent omissions, inaccuracies and outright flights of fancy. Bhisham, guided by his impulse to edit and revise the original text, made mysterious changes and rewrote or transcreated the text. These translations either omit or gloss over difficult bites and are not fidel to the original text. Govind Nihalani's television serial, considered as third translation, made major changes in plot and recreated scenes. In her pursuit of helpful translation, Rockwell became third or fourth translator of *Tamas* and dedicated her translation to the refugees (and their descendents) displaced by the politically formented violence.

The novel *Tamas* is dedicated to Balraj Sahni, Bhisham Sahni's elder brother, who settled in Bombay after Partition, associated himself with IPTA and acted in landmark movies of Parallel Cinema such as K A. Abbas' *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946), Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), M. S. Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* (1973), etc. Divided into twenty one chapters, *Tamas* deals with the story of a skinner named Nathu, who is bribed and deceived by a smug, self-righteous Muslim, Murad Ali, to kill a pig, ostensibly for the purposes of a British veterinarian. The novel comprises many strands which are interwoven directly and indirectly with the episode of the pig and the resultant communal upsurge in the city and a hundred and three villages around the city. It is not merely about Nathu and Murad Ali whose single act of abuse can be regarded as responsible for communal riot, arsony, looting, abduction of women, etc. The novel opens with Nathu, consigned for five rupees by Murad Ali, to kill a pig for veterinary surgeon. Nathu has to work hard to kill the pig and out of exhaustion and perspiration, he moves out of the hut, against Murad Ali's instruction. Chapter two gives an acquaintance with the chief District Congress Committee Members who have gathered early in the morning, though not at assigned time, for prabhat pheri but it is found out that the work declared by Gosainji, a District Congress Committee member without the knowledge of Mehtaji, a District Congress Committee President whose looks resemble Jawaharlal Nehru, and Bakshiji, the secretary of the District Congress Committee, the two prominent leaders of the District Congress Committee, was that of cleaning the drains. Bhisham was a Congress worker before the Partition and knew the internal disputes of the party. Among them, there is a fifty year old lunatic in military uniform called Jarnail, who had attended Congress session in Lahore and taken an oath for India's full Independence on the banks of Ravi with Pandit Nehru, who, unlike other Congress leaders, is



always ready for police's lathi-charge. Nathu is seen walking through the various streets of the city in the next chapter, and the confrontation occurs between the District Congress Committee and the Muslim League members about not going to the streets of Muslim locality. Chapter four reveals an important strand of the novel: that of Richard, the British Deputy Commissioner and his wife Liza. Richard takes his London returned and lonely feeling Liza on a trip to his excavation site which is followed by a discussion about Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, a discussion initiated by Liza who has no knowledge about these groups. Chapter five presents the District Congress Committee members cleaning filth in a Muslim locality where the quarrel, as usual, erupts between the two District Congress Committee members Kashmiri Lal and Shankar about the relevance of cleaning filth for India's Independence. Shankar and Kashmiri Lal are not in good terms with each other as the latter had not selected him as a member on behalf of the Party for Nehru's assembly at Lahore yet he had attended it on his own expenditure and slightly misbehaved at the dining table. The District Congress Committee members are advised to move out of the Muslim locality and they have to do so as the stones are hurled upon them. Later, the District Congress Committee members come to know about a carcass of the pig thrown in front of Khailon Ki Masjid, the chief Jama Mosque of the city. Bakshiji and the Jarnail remove the carcass as the former senses the tension brewing in the area as long as the carcass remains there. Bakshiji mutters: "It seems kites and vultures will hover over the town for a long time" (Sahni, *Tamas* 70). The novel takes a violent turn from this juncture onwards, never to return to the same peace and harmony.

The weekly Congregation of the Hindu Sabha and other such Hindu organizations come to meet the vanprasthi in chapter six. The vanprasthi chants sacred hymns at the congregation which is followed by the announcement of the news of a deputation meeting the Deputy District Commissioner Richard and the discussion about communal tension in the city and the decision to form Mohalla Committees and other such measures for the protection of Hindus. Mastar Dev Vrat, a young member of congregation and the organizer of Youth Wing akhara takes an initiation test of Ranvir, son of Lala Laxmi Narain, a cloth merchant and a philanthropist member of the Hindu organization at the congregation. Ranvir is somewhat declared successful in the test of killing a hen and enrolled as a Youth Committee Member. After his enrolment, Ranvir starts the activities of the



Youth Committee first by hurting the halwai for the cauldron on a day of riot and becomes the self-appointed leader of the Youth Wing. Chapter seven begins with the deputation's discussion with the Deputy Commissioner Richard about taking measures to hinder communal violence in the city. The deputation of prominent political parties – Bakshiji from District Congress Committee, Hayat Baksh from the Muslim League, Sardarji from Sikh Sabha, Mr. Herbert, the American Principal of Mission College, Professor Raghunath, a lecturer in literature, and Lala Laxmi Narain, member of the Hindu Sabha – returns from Richard's bungalow without much success in pursuing the commissioner to clamp the curfew or fly the helicopter over the city to show alertness of the administration. In the later part of the chapter, Liza is shown to be feeling loneliness and boredom in the absence of Richard at bungalow and to evade such feelings, takes refuge into drinking excessive beer. The religiously fraught atmosphere of the city also makes her try to distinguish a Hindu from a Muslim, Roshan Lal from Roshan Din.

Chapter eight is located in the main Shivala Bazaar where Hindus and Muslims pursue their community's business. The novelist describes the atmosphere the city: "Every activity gave the impression of having combined to create an inner harmony to which the heart of the town throbbed. It was to the same rhythm that people were born, grew up and became old, that generations came and went. This rhythm or symphony was the creation of centuries of communal living, of the inhabitants having come together in harmony. One would think that every activity was like a chord in a musical instrument, and if even one string snapped the instrument would produce only jarring notes (*Tamas* 115). But in the years of the freedom struggle, the narrator senses the tenor of the town's life disturbed, arousing tensions when Sikhs or Muslims carry out processions on Guru Nanak's birthday or Muharram. Sardar Hukum Singh's wife merrily quarrels over the timely stitching of her daughter's wedding dress with the famous tailor of wedding dresses Khuda Baksh, who is alarmed and feared by the Gurkha chowkidar Ram Bali repairing the bell as it had been installed after the communal riots of 1926: "I tremble when I hear that sound [...] The first time the alarm bell was rung when the Grain Market had been set on fire and half the sky was covered with the glow of its flames" (119). This is an actual historical reference to the first communal riot in Rawalpindi in 1926 witnessed by Bhisham when he was ten or eleven years old. At Fazal-din, the



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Nanbai's shop, Nathu is taking tea and listening to Karim Khan's narration of an allegorical tale of the musa and Hazrat Khizr about the foresightedness of the ruler to Jilani and others: "[...] a ruler can see what you and I, ordinary folk, cannot see. The British ruler has all-seeing eyes, otherwise how can it be possible that a handful of firanghis coming from across the seven seas should rule over so big a country? The firanghis are very wise, very subtle, very far-sighted..." (124). The Pir of Golra Sharif arrives to clean the defiled mosque. Later Nathu watches and wants to meet Murad Ali in the street to make confirmation of the deed but Murad Ali refuses to talk or even recognize Nathu and walks away from him. Amidst the scenes of shops being doused off in the Grain Market, Nathu reaches home and anxiously tries to know about the carcass of the pig from his wife. The sounds of Allah-O-Akbar and Har Har Mahadev are heard. Liza gets awakened due to these sounds of rioters and is frightened.

Lalaji is shown to be searching for his woodchopper in chapter nine. He is worried about his son Ranvir who is out of house at night of tension in the city. He asks Nanku, the servant, to go to their in-laws to request them to send their friend Shah Nawaz for them, though his wife protests against sending the young boy in the jaws of death. There is also a depiction of the scene of a Sikh man pursued in the lane outside. In chapter ten, Shah Nawaz takes in his car the Lalaji family to Professor Raghunath's place. After dropping them there, he embarks upon the task of bringing the jewellery of Janaki, Raghunath's wife forgotten at their old place. Affected by scenes of riots and words of rioters, Shah Nawaz kills to death Raghunath's servant Milkhi, who was guarding their old house. Bhisham hints at how in worst times even good people can commit bad deeds. Chapter eleven describes Dev Datt's visit to the Party office, despite his parents' efforts to prevent him, to discuss the situation during the riots at the communist party meeting,. He decides to call up an all party meet and prepare the draft of the Appeal of Peace. Some issues and disagreements are raised at the meeting and Dev Datt decides finally to go to Ratta to prevent the working classes from participating in riots. The novelist was also influenced by the Marxist ideology and wrote that the communists were not in favour of Partition but they could not make their point clear on the question of the Muslims as a different race. The final section of the chapter records the Jarnail's death in the Committee Mohalla while delivering a speech about maintaining peace in the town: "Sahiban,



Gandhiji has said that Hindus and Muslims are brothers, that they should not fight one another. I appeal to all of you, young and old, men and women, to stop fighting. It does great harm to the country. India's wealth is swallowed up by that fair-faced monkey who bosses over us..." (190). In the same vein, he appeals further: "Sahiban, Hindus and Muslims are brothers. There is rioting in the city; fires are raging and there is no one to stop it. The Deputy Commissioner is sitting in his bungalow, with his madam in his arms. I say, our real enemy is the Englishman. Gandhiji says, Pakistan shall be made over his dead body. I also say that Pakistan shall be made over my dead body. We are brothers, we shall live together, we shall live as one..." (190).

In chapter twelve, the Youth League decides to launch its operations and Inder is chosen to attack the scent-selling person. This scene of chasing is regarded by Alok Bhalla as one of the finest scenes in Partition fiction (*Memory* 3122). We get moved by the caring and affectionate human gesture that the scent-selling person extends to Inder who later stabs him to death with a knife: "Where are you going, son, at this time of the day?" [...] "Where do you live, child? Keep walking along with me. One should not stir out of the house on a day like this" (200). Inder measures his distance with a sort of concentration with which Arjun "must have been on the bird on the branch of the tree" (202). When the scent-seller sees his blood, he sobs for himself and cries out for help to anyone who would lend ears to his words. The doors of all the houses remain shut. Vultures hover in the sky above, attracted neither by the valour of Hinduism nor by the defeat of Islam, but by the dead carrion in the streets below.

Chapter thirteen describes Nathu's revelation about the pig to his wife who rebukes him: "Why did you commit such a loathsome act? [...]" "What a horrible thing you have done" (210). Later she gives him consolation by saying: "Listen. We are chamars. To kill animals and skin hides is our profession. You killed a pig. Now how does it concern us whether they sell it in the market or throw it on the steps of a mosque?" (209-212). She wishes to buy dhotis for Nathu with this tainted money. Nathu's fellow skinner discusses about the people killed in a riot broken out in Ratta. Nathu is asked by his wife to go out and meet the fellow-skinners, each promising to keep the matter secret. Nathu's wife cleans the house as if trying to remove the phantom from the house, but "the phantom was crawling back into the room through the chinks of the closed door and that the house



was once again becoming dark with its presence” (213).

The following chapter moves to the village Dhok Ilahi Baksh where Karim Khan repeatedly admonishes his friend Harnam Singh to leave the village: “Things have taken a bad turn, Harnam Singh. Your welfare lies in leaving the place.” [...] “Local people will not do you any harm but it is feared that marauders may come from outside. We may not be able to stop them.” [...] “Don’t delay, Harnam Singh. The situation is not good. There is fear of marauders attacking” (216-217). After much hesitation and thinking, Harnam Singh and his old wife Banto decides to leave the village as they are the only senile Sikh couple living there, with the former saying: “If it comes to killing or getting killed, I shall shoot you down with this gun first and then kill myself” (218). Harnam Singh’s shop is attacked and doused to fire by the marauders from Khanpur who are the members of the Muslim League and shout Pakistani slogans. Before leaving, Banto releases the myna who repeats the words: “God be with you, Banto! May God be with everyone” (220). They pass that entire night “praying, brooding and dragging their feet” (226) and finally arrive in the village Dhok Muridpur and knock at the door of Rajo’s house.

Chapter fifteen shows the Sikhs of the Khalsa Panth gathered in the gurdwara in Sayedpur village where there is a long mythical history of rivalry between Turks and Sikhs. Sardar Teja Singh, the chief of the congregation at the gurdwara, addresses the congregation. The quarrel erupts among the communist Mir Dad and the Sikhs over the matter of riot and peace negotiation with the Muslims, especially Sheikh Ghulam Rasul. A Sikh from gurdwara named Gopal Singh is chased while spying on the activities of the enemy. The shouts are heard from everywhere and the riot begins. In one of the attacks, the old goldsmith Karim Baksh is killed by Baldev Singh as avenge for his mother’s murder. Jasbir Kaur, Harnam Singh’s daughter also takes shelter into the gurdwara and chants the Ardas.

Chapter sixteen narrates the episode of Harnam Singh and Banto taking shelter into Rajo’s house in Dhok Muridpur where Ehsan Ali, Rajo’s husband, arrives with a looted trunk of Harnam Singh. The resurfacing of past acquaintances of Ehsan Ali with Harnam Singh arouse compassion in him for the later and let him hide in the godown. But the arrival of Ramzan Ali, Rajo and Ehsan Ali’s son, to whom Akran, Ramzan’s wife, has confided the secret of having given shelter to Kafirs.



As a result, Ramzan, who is also a member of the Muslim League, attacks on the door in anger but shows mercy before striking the pickaxe, as: “It is one thing to kill a kafir, it is quite another to kill someone you know and who has sought shelter in your house. A thin line was still there which was difficult to cross, despite the fact that the atmosphere was charged with religious frenzy and hatred” (269). Finally, Rajo bids farewell to Harnam Singh and Banto while returning his gun and jewellery. In chapter seventeen, Ramzan, Nur Din and others attack with stones Iqbal Singh, Harnam Singh’s son, who is later caught, made to recite the Kalma, converted to Islam as Iqbal Ahmad: “By the time evening fell, all marks of Sikhism on Iqbal Singh’s person had been replaced by the marks of the Muslim faith. A mere change of marks had brought about the transformation. Now he was no longer an enemy but a friend, not a kafir but a believer, to whom the doors of all Muslim houses were open” (281).

Chapter eighteen opens with the description of the fight between the Turks and the Khalsa Sikhs for two days and two nights. The communist Sohan Singh is killed in the fight. The ‘mujahids,’ sitting on the terrace of Sheikh Ghulam Rasul’s house, narrate their exploits and experiences to one another. About their abduction and rape of one Hindu girl, one mujahid says: “When my turn came there was no sound from her; she wouldn’t move. I looked at her; she was dead. I had been doing it to a dead body” (288). The episode reminds of Manto’s terrible Partition story *Thanda Gosht* (“Colder Than Ice”), charged for obscenity, in which Ishwar Singh copulates with the dead body of a woman abducted from a Muslim house during the loot (Manto 21). The young Granthi Mehar Singh who was sent by the War Committee of the Gurdwara to negotiate with the Turks is also killed. Amidst the slogans of “Jo Boley So Nihal! Sat Sri Akal” and “Allah-O-Akbar,” Jasbir Kaur is seen holding the kirpan and chant the Japji Sahib with other Sikh women. She is followed by other Sikh women along with their children to a well wherein all of them jump (27 total women) chanting the verses of the Gurbani (292-293). The novelist describes the village after the riots: “When it was broad daylight, kites, vultures and crows arrived in large numbers and hovered over the village, and particularly in the vicinity of the village well. [...] Dead bodies lying here and there, added to the gloom and sense of desolation all round. Footsteps of a man walking in a lane would produce a deafening sound. [...] On the path leading to the ‘well of death’, lay



scattered hair-clips, ribbons, dupattas, broken pieces of bangles and the like, while the lanes in the village were littered with empty boxes, trunks, canisters and cots, telling the story of the scourge that had befallen the village” (295). The aeroplane is seen by the people of Sayedpur village taking rounds of riot affected villages. Later the normalcy is restored in them.

The atmosphere of curfew in the city is described in chapter nineteen. Richard takes rounds of twenty villages affected by riots in an armoured car. Two refugee camps and two government hospitals are set up. There is also the Relief Committee Office set up by the National Congress. Richard visits the Health Officer Mr. Kapur’s residence and gives him instructions about the arrangements for the refugees and about visiting the Sayedpur village after three days of riots which is followed by a heated conversation about it with Bakshiji who blames the British: “This is the role the British have all along played—they first bring about a riot and then quell it; they starve the people first and then give them bread; they render them homeless and then begin to provide shelter to them” (307). Richard returns to his bungalow from there and sees Liza lying on sofa in a drunken state. They converse about what has happened in the city but Richard feels afraid of Liza breaking relationship or going back to London again. Towards the end of conversation, Richard expresses a desire to take Liza on a lovely drive to Sayedpur and Taxila as he cannot afford at present to break their marriage when the prospects of his promotion in administration appear. When Richard describes the scenic beauty of Sayedpur after riot, Liza wonders: “What sort of a person are you, Richard that in such places too you can see new kinds of birds and listen to the warbling of the lark?” (312-315)

Chapter twenty starts with the Relief Committee work. The Statistics Babu maintains in figures the register of only the material losses of Refugees of one hundred and three villages burnt down. Harnam Singh and Ganda Singh recount their losses largely in emotional terms. One Sardar of Sayedpur is also trying to bribe the Statistics Babu to get gold chain and bracelets of his wife who fell into the well. Dev Datt asks the Babu to add “another column in the register indicating the numbers of poor people killed as against well-to-do-people” (325). The heated arguments follow over the Gandhian concept of non-violence among some Congress workers. Kashmiri Lal asks, “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?” (326) The quarrel is quelled by Bakshiji by saying: “You yourself should not indulge in violence. That is number one. You should persuade the fellow to desist from using violence. That is number two. And if he does not listen, fight him tooth and nail. That is number three” (327). The later part of the chapter deals with the story of a Brahmin pundit and his wife. Their daughter Parkasho, according to them, is kidnapped by the tonga-driver of their village, Allah Rakha. Contrarily, Allah Rakha admired Parkasho and as a result, teased her by throwing pebbles when she would go to fetch water; but during the riots he stopped people burning their tenement and locked it. Love sprouts for Allah Rakha in Parkasho’s heart who has taken good care of her during the riots.

In the last chapter of the novel, we hear the news of a meeting of the Peace Committee in the Mission College run by a Christian Mission. Sheikh Nur Elahi and Lala Laxmi Narain discuss property matters with the property dealer Munshi Ram: “After the riots a strong trend had set in— Muslims were keen to move out of Hindu localities, and likewise, Hindus and Sikhs from predominantly Muslim localities” (337). It shifts later to the conversation between Lalaji and the Statistics Babu about Mangal Sen getting the Congress ticket for Lalaji’s ward in the forthcoming Municipal Elections. Later Lalaji inquires about some herbal medicine for his injured son Ranvir from Hayat Baksh who offers to give him oil from Lahore and advises him to send Ranvir away for a few days to avoid the danger of his arrest. Seeing all party and organization members together, one peon of the college remarks: “We poor people are such ignorant fools, we go breaking one another’s head. These well-to-do people are so wise and sensible. They are all here, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs. See how cordially they are meeting one another” (343). A heated argument ensues between a Muslim League member and a Congress activist about the creation of Pakistan and the representation of Muslims by the Congress. The Congress is perceived to be the party of the Hindus. Though there is a quarrel over the selection of different members of the meeting for Peace Committee, finally Mr. Herbert is appointed as the President, Hayat Baksh, Bakshiji and Bhai Jodha Singhji as Vice Presidents; Comrade Dev Datt as the general secretary; and fifteen Working Committee members of which seven are Muslims, five Hindus and three Sikhs. The Peace Mission of the Peace Bus is carried out with Murad Ali raising slogans such as “Long Live Hindu Muslim



Unity!", "Peace Committee Zindabad!" and "Hindus and Muslims are one!" (350). Bakshiji sitting beside Hayat Baksh was feeling extremely sad and mumbling: "Kites shall hover, kites and vultures shall continue to hover for long . . ." (351). The novel ends with Richard conversing with Liza about his possible transference to a new place, a usual government initiative after disturbance at the place and his old plan to write a book.

Representation of History in *Tamas*

According to Ashis Nandy, Partition is a neglected genre and the body of literature on the violence of Partition is not as voluminous as on Jewish, Armenian or Bosnian and Rwandan genocide. Political scientists and historians have not dealt with the consequences of the violence of Partition (*Days* xiv). Urvashi Butalia also wonders: "Why had the history of partition been so lacking in describing how partition had impacted on the lives of ordinary people, what it had actually meant to them? Why had historians not even attempted to explore what I saw as the underside of this history – the feelings, the emotions, the pain and anguish, the trauma, the sense of loss, the silences in which it lay shrouded? Was it just historiographical neglect or something deeper – a refusal, on the part of historians to face upto a trauma so riven with pain and grief, that there needed to be some distance before they could confront it?" (*Other* 347) Even the path-breaking research on Partition produced by Indian scholars like Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon did not have any first-hand experience of violence. So it was left to the literary writers like Khadija Mastur, Qurratulian Hyder, Khushwant Singh, Krishna Sobti, Balwant Singh, Krishan Chander, Bhisham Sahni, Anis Kidwai, Kamlaben Patel, etc. who had such experiences and tried to represent them in their literary works for readers like us to understand what Partition was and what people actually passed through during Partition.

Bhisham thinks that if a writer chooses a historical person or a period of history for his story, in order to make his work more authentic and effective, he should accumulate less facts and figures of history. The too-much worry about the historical facts would become an obstacle to the writer's imagination and his/her creative work would not develop independently. Reality and fiction blur. The realistic depiction of any real life event is not necessary for any authentic work of art. The



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imaginative depiction of reality is more effective than the realistic. Imagination will reveal the truth behind reality (Sahni, *Aaj* 229). In his Introduction to Jai Ratan's English translation (1988) of *Tamas*, the director of the Doordarshan serial Govind Nihalani (whose family migrated from Karachi) also makes an observation about the interconnected relationship between history and fiction: "A Dramatic historical event usually finds the artistic/literary response twice. Once, during the event or immediately following it and again after a lapse of time, when the event has found its corner in the collective memory of the generation that witnessed it. The initial response tends to be emotionally intense and personal in character, even melodramatic. On the other hand, when the event is reflected upon with emotional detachment and objectivity, a clearer pattern of the various forces that shaped it is likely to emerge. *Tamas* is the reflective response to the partition of India—one of the most tragic events in the recent history of the Indian sub-continent" (2008: 2). Nihalani states that when *Tamas* was made into a television serial, some religious groups went to court to stop its screening. Two judges Bakhtawar Lentin and Sujata Manohar of Bombay High Court did not censor or prevent the broadcast of *Tamas* and offered their ruling: *Tamas* "depicts how communal violence was generated by fundamentalists and extremists in both communities and how innocent persons were dumped into serving the ulterior purposes of fundamentalists and communalists" (Jussawala 194). Bhisham's interpretation of events around Partition is thought to be leaning more on religious grounds than on historical complexities. The episodes and the perspectives in *Tamas* are same and avoid a multiple perspective on Partition. However, Bhisham draws different concentric circles of experience and builds up their cumulative effect. *Tamas* tells the story of ordinary people, caught miserably in the cataclysmic event of Partition. The ordinary people of India like Nathu and Harnam Singh could not understand or stop the communal carnage. In choosing to act as Harnam Singh in Nihalani's Doordarshan serial, Bhisham wanted to relive the political refusal of his father Shri Babu Haribanslal Sahni, a rich businessman in Rawalpindi. Babu Haribanslal Sahni's historical understanding was like that of millions of Hindus and Muslims: "Rules keep changing. If there is one rule today, there will be another tomorrow. Do people abandon their homes just because the rule has changed? Has that ever happened?" (Sahni, *Aaj* 132) He did not want to leave his home, land and shops in Rawalpindi and stayed along with his servant until November with a hope that people leaving their homes would return after some time. Bhisham



was in Delhi to observe the celebrations of India's Independence, Balraj in Bombay and the rest of the family in Srinagar where also erupted the trouble of the Kabali invasion. The house in Rawalpindi was attacked immediately after the evacuation of his father to Srinagar by a motor car. Bhisham found his family taking shelter into one of their relative's house in Delhi. The streets of Delhi were flooded with the *sharanarthis* (refugees). On one hand, there was the atmosphere of jubilation and on the other, the hapless condition of homeless people. Years later when Balraj visited their Rawalpindi house, it was occupied by a Muslim family which was celebrating a marriage (Sahni, *Aaj* 132-135).

Feroza Jussawalla criticized *Tamas* by calling it a precursor to Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in India: "With the history behind us of six million Jews killed in the Holocaust and ten million Hindus and Muslims killed during the Partition, the task before us should be one of amelioration and prevention and not the creation of new religious tensions" (194). According to her, our contemporary authors have forgotten the art of chronicling of history without creating new antagonism. The principle problem in chronicling Partition in *Tamas* is that it seeks to assign blame. The novel's account of Partition is one-sided. With regard to the Holocaust, Adolf Hitler was one single evil genius to be blamed, but in the context of Partition and its aftermath there were many culprits on both sides (195).

However, Bhisham did not have any motive to instigate communal violence nor did he lack seriousness as an artist. By writing *Tamas*, he wanted to reaffirm the days of communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. He was once again attempting to reorder for his own self a previously stable world. The memories of a communally harmonious life before Partition guided Bhisham's present secular politics and offered him hope. He never suggested that pre-Partition Rawalpindi and Lahore were idyllic communities. Despite contingent problems of life and its everyday miseries, Rawalpindi and Lahore were "home" and as old cities, they had culture and civilization. There were not any extreme events of religious prejudices between Hindus and Muslims which would foretell the inevitability of the Partition. According to Bhalla, to assert that the Muslim identity in the Indian subcontinent has always been formed in antagonistic relationship with it, making the formation of Pakistan a political necessity and a logical outcome of cultural



differences, is not only bad history but also bad metaphysics (*Memory* 3123). The narrative of *Tamas* suggests that before Partition, the respective identities of Hindus and Muslims had not been formed in contempt of each other. Their life-world was communally shared and therefore, when Partition actually took place, there was absolute bewilderment among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and other communities (*Memory* 13). In his interview with Alok Bhalla, Bhisham Sahni reminisced that when he had left Lahore to watch the Independence Day celebrations at the Red Fort in Delhi on August 14, 1947, the train (Frontier Mail) he took turned out to be the last one to Amritsar (*Partition Dialogues*). In his story “Gaddi Amritsar Pahunch Gayee,” translated by Bhalla as “The Train Has Reached Amritsar,” Bhisham recorded what he had heard and experienced during the journey. In the beginning, there was neither antagonism nor anxiety among the passengers. The Muslim Pathans in the compartment joked with a Hindu Babu from Peshawar for being weak and called him ‘dalkhor’. The Sardarji asked Bhisham the narrator again and again whether Jinnah Sahib would continue to live in Bombay or migrate to the newly created nation, Pakistan. The narrator had answered: “Why should he leave Bombay? What would be the point? He can always go to Pakistan and come back (Bhisham, *Train* 147).” They also thought about the side on which Lahore and Gurdaspur would go after the Partition. They talked in a usual way and joked with each other.

The great bulk of Partition fiction published immediately after 1947 are not communal narratives. But they are the horrible chronicles which show people in the middle of madness and crime, and promises only random and capricious violence. In that communal frenzy, anyone can kill anyone. They neither offer any historical explanation for the violence, nor show any political necessity for it. There was no logic about Partition and the resultant communal mayhem. There can be no justification or atonement for such violence. The violence of 1946-48 brought out the worst in us and it had grave consequences for the later history not only of India but the whole of South Asia. As the end of Khushwant Singh’s novel *Train To Pakistan* teaches, the romantic sacrifice given by the Sikh dacoit Juggut Singh in love for a Muslim girl Nooran saves the lives of many innocent migrants; violence cannot be an answer to violence but love can be an alternative to violence and an aid for harmony (Ahmmmed 154). The novelist was disillusioned by freedom accompanied by



(in)human bestiality. The high conditions of communalism calls for a greater self-sacrifice than revenge (Banerjee 148). Partition is therefore a ghastly example of a long history of communal conflicts which undermine India's secular structure and unity.

Conclusion

Tamas as a topical novel is a significant contribution to Indian literature. It is relevant in terms of raising the problems of the criminalization of society and politics which still ail contemporary India. As a progressive and secular writer, Bhisham Sahni expresses his resistance to the politics of religious bigotry which threaten to break the cohesive social fabric of India. He voices the problems that the common people faced during Partition. However, the theme of Partition is more demanding. In his telephonic conversation, Kurup reminisces about Bhisham Sahni putting down the phone, amidst slogans of Allah-o-Akbar! Har Har Mahadev! Sat Sri Akal! as if with the words "We are brothers. Do not kill each other!" (21)

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