

Communal Violence in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on the contemporary social evil communalism which our country has been facing since the ancient times. Shashi Tharoor is a prominent contemporary Indian writer in English. Most of his novels focus on contemporary social and political issues that affect not only the common man but the whole nation also. His works revolve around the social and political issues concurrent in society as obstacles for the growth of the nation. Tharoor's *Riot* focuses on the riot due to the communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims. Tharoor demonstrates how the clashes between two religion result in a riot in which a number of innocent lives become the prey. By presenting voices from both the Hindu and the Muslim communities, he tries to prove how history is exploited for vested interests. In this novel, Tharoor tries to show the dark reality of communalism and subsequent riots and suggests the need for change in the mindset of people. Tharoor's *Riot* is set against the historical background of religious tensions in India over the Babri Masjid, which was demolished by the Hindu zealots in 1992.

Key-words: Communalism, riots, fundamentalism, politics, community

Communalism is a basically a clash between two or more religions. Communalism is sometimes referred as ideological politics or political ideology. Recent studies show that communalism is a political ideology which is practiced all over the world in order to dominate or control the weak, the inferior or the poor. Communalism in India is a modern phenomenon and communal riots have been a regular feature in Indian society,

more so after the time of partition. These riots are apparently instigated by some politicians for their personal profits. According to D. E Smith, “Communalism is the term used in India to describe the political functioning of individuals or groups for the selfish interest of particular religious communities or castes” (191). Prabha Dixit, in her book *Communalism: A Struggle for Power* rightly asserts that “Communalism is based upon political doctrine, making use of religious and cultural differences to achieve political purposes” (01). Politicians have always been alleged to have played a villainous role in provoking serious communal riots in India. The power-hungry people use religion as an instrument to achieve their political ends. As W. C. Smith rightly observes:

Religion is used as an instrument to provide justification for acts which are otherwise inhuman and undesirable. Further, history has many times shown that religion is ready to excuse atrocities... Once a conflict has started for economic or other reasons and then it assumes a communalist guise, it tends to expand to include innocent co-religionists of the real enemies. (40)

One need not be reminded about the politics behind the division of India in 1947 in the name of particular religious community, in the guise of ‘Two Nation Theory’. But that was not the end of political intrigues; in fact, that was the beginning of dirty politics in India. Despite paying a heavy price in partition, riots did not stop even long after it. One can find the involvement of a political party directly or indirectly in practically all riots. Sometimes these communal riots are planned by the politicians just for the sake of their vote bank. Riots still continue in many parts of India and our country is paying a heavy price. It is perhaps this recurring of riots that disturbs the writers and compel them to articulate their voices in form of a literary piece.

Riot: A Novel, Shashi Tharoor’s fourth novel published in 2001, is set against the backdrop of the religious conflicts in India in 1989 after the demolition of Babri Masjid. The novel describes the communal violence erupted in a small district of

Uttar Pradesh named Zailgarh on the occasion of Ram Sila Poojan with its consequences on the lives of ordinary people. The novel describes the life of an American young lady Priscilla Hart, who accidentally becomes the victim of this communal violence. The novel opens with the news of the death of Priscilla Hart in a communal riot erupted in Zailgarh, Uttar Pradesh. The outbreak of such a riot in a small town like Zailgarh created a situation of communal unrest not only in Uttar Pradesh but all over the country. Besides this, the present novel also focuses on the Hindu-Sikh riot of 1984. As an innovator, Shashi Tharoor describes the incidents of the novel through multiple narrators and through diaries, poems, letters, interviews and conversations. The novel portrays the conflict between two different religious ideologies through the dominant voices of Ram Charan Gupta and Prof. Mohammed Sarwar.

The current novel begins with several newspaper reports in the *New York Journal*. One of the newspapers, published on 2nd October, 1989, informs us about the death of Priscilla Hart, an American student and social worker working with the non-governmental association HELP-US in Zailgarh, Uttar Pradesh. She is stabbed to death and the reason behind her death is not told to the readers neither at the beginning nor at the end of the novel. At one hand, the novel portrays the growing communal violence between the Hindus and the Muslims but at the same time the novel also describes the encounter of Indian-American culture. As the protagonist of the novel, Priscilla Hart is approaches India in order complete her Doctorate project and to aware the Indians about population control.

Priscilla came to India at the time when our country was dealing with a dangerous disease i.e. the disease of communalism. During this difficult time, there starts a love story between Priscilla Hart and Lakshman, the district collector of Zailgarh. In the meantime, there starts the preparation of Ram Shila Poojan campaign in Zailgarh. Unfortunately, Priscilla becomes the victim of Hindu-Muslim riots that explodes over the Ram Shila Poojan. Through the interviews of various government officials, we come to know about the Hindu-Muslim conflict that is brewing in northern India. The novel further shows

the pleasant relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims and how the people of both communities have fought for the Independence with the feeling of brotherhood in the pre-independence period. But due to the politics of some power equipped people, this harmonious relationship was ended with the partition. Just before the partition, the poisonous seed of religion was sown in the minds of the people of both the communities and since then both the communities are fighting with each other in the name of religion. Despite these dark issues, Tharoor seems to be an optimist in this novel. He presents a balanced picture of the people of both the communities.

In the present novel, the author uses two different voices of Ram Charan Gupta and Prof. Mohammed Sarwar to show how history can be a source to instigate communal passions of the people of a particular religion. Ram Charan Gupta, a chauvinistic Hindu fundamental leader gives voice to the sentiments of Hindu community. Prof. Mohammed Sarwar is a Muslim political leader. He speaks on behalf of his community. These two political leaders of the two distinct religious groups talk about the grievances of their communities and bear with the situations of injustice as citizens of India.

Through the voice of Ram Charan Gupta, Tharoor shows that people like him use religion as a tool for his personal interests. Ram Charan Gupta is a scheming politician whose eyes are always on the vote bank and for the sake of vote bank he always instigates the Hindus against the Muslims on the name of religion. When Randy Diggs, an American journalist meets him, Ram Charan Gupta tells the reason of making of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. He states that in the past, there was a big temple in Ayodhya but the Mughal emperor, Babar broke it and built a big Mosque named the Babri Masjid. Gupta opines that the Hindu got hurt with this but they did nothing but wait. Now since Most Muslims in Ayodhya left for Pakistan so it was no longer much needed as a mosque. Then there happened a miracle. Some people claimed that a statue of Ram appeared automatically in the inner area of the mosque. The people believed that this was a clear sign from God that a temple has to be rebuilt on the holy place.

When the case reached to the Government of India, the Government has dispersed all the evidences by considering them as not valid. Also the Government released strict order to not to construct any temple in place of the Babri Masjid. In order to prevent both the Hindus and the Muslims for worshipping there, the temple was locked by the government. Our so called Hindu fundamentalist Ram Charan Gupta along with some caretaker of our religion condemned the Government stand and considered it as injustice and state that it didn't matter what the government said. It is people's wish that there must be a temple of Rama and they will surely rebuild the temple. So bricks and other material were brought from each and every village to Ayodhya to rebuild the temple. Gupta motivated all the people to take part in this project. He also provokes them against the Muslims stating that the Muslims are more loyal to a foreign religion Islam than to India. He also holds Muslims responsible for dividing the country and creating their Pakistan on the sacred soil of Indian civilization.

Ram Charan Gupta's sharp satires do not spare even Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru whom he calls 'a Muslim-loving brown Englishman'. He was a Muslim-loving ruler. He observes that Nehru had provided the Muslim the right to have four wives at a time. And the Hindus are angry that "the Muslims are given money by the Government to visit Mecca-for the ships and planes to take them there every year" (55). He criticizing them by stating that the money spent on these things had been paid by the Hindus as a tax and the worst is that "every Muslim with four wives each, are 'out-breeding Hindus'" (55). Gupta's worst tension is that Muslims would soon outnumber Hindus in India. He goes on saying that the Muslims have their own educational institutions with government subsidies. They get top priorities in the bureaucracy. They have even managed special status for creating the only Muslim-Majority State. He asks Randy Diggs that though Kashmir is ours but is it possible for a Hindu to buy a piece of Land in Kashmir? Gupta then exposes that his party's main agenda is to defeat these so called secularists who have humiliated the feelings and emotions of the Hindus.

Gupta further criticizes the Muslims by giving the example of

Shaha Bano to show that the Muslims doesn't even spare woman to harass. He blamed that the Muslim husband wants a divorce from his seventy-five- year old wife. He offers her to pay just forty rupees in alimony. He justifies that in Muslim religion he is obliged to return the bride price she had brought in her marriage before sixty years. But how can survive with such a little amount after sixty years? So she proceeds to the court for justice. She first approaches to the local court and then to the Supreme Court. Though she won the case, unfortunately she didn't get justice due to the new law passed by the Government of Rajiv Gandhi. Gupta calls the Muslims fanatics and terrorists. They understand only the language of force. He is of the view that Violence against the innocent Hindus is in their blood. Whenever they are in power, they always try to oppress the other people. Gupta feels very bad that the Muslims have spoiled the sacred event of Ram Sila Poojan procession. They are evil people. They started to attack the Hindus as they always do. In this way, the overall tone of Ram Charan's speech shows his feelings of hatred against Muslims. Tharoor presents Gupta as the mouthpiece of the Hindus.

To defend Gupta's criticism against Muslims, Tharoor introduces the character of Professor Mohammad Sarwar, a Muslim scholar, teaching in the Department of History of Delhi University. He is shown as a liberal historian in the novel. In Zailgarh, he works on a research programme on the life of Ghazi Miyan, a well-known Muslim warrior and worshipped as a saint in Zailgarh by both the communities. He tries to defend the minority psyche of the Muslims. In a conversation with Lakshman, the District Magistrate of Zailgarh, he exposes that history may be manipulated by some communal minded people to instigate communal passions of the people. He reminds Lakshman a number of Muslims who served Indian community selflessly. He goes on telling that a number of Muslim religious figures like Moinuddin Chisti, Mohammed Iqbal etc. are worshipped in India even by the Hindus but still Hindus have grudges against the Muslims. He is of the view that, "the Indian Muslims are suffering disadvantages and discrimination in one or another ways" (112). In his views, our country is suffering

from a disease named 'prejudice', as Hindus are prejudiced against Muslims. He claims that the Muslims are an essential part of the indivisible unity i.e. Indian nationality. Without the help of the Muslims, the overall structure of India is incomplete. About the partition, he blamed those who contributed to the two nation theory as he claims that, "Muslim didn't partition the country- the British did, the Muslim League and the Congress Party did" (111).

It is clear that through Professor Mohammad Sarwar, Tharoor does not want to favour or represent Muslim ideology rather he wants that it is the duty of the historians that they should represent the historical figures, whether they are Hindus or Muslims, from secular point of view in order to maintain the Hindu-Muslim unity.

Prof. Mohammed Sarwar, also have deep faith in the unity of our nation. Admitting the Mandir-Masjid communal tempo, he recites the great speech of Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad who, instead of being a Muslim scholar does not want the division of India into two Nations on the basis of communalism. He always dreams of secular India and united India. According to Prof. Mohammed, Kalam's these words are the greatest evidence of the faith of a religious Muslim in a united India. On the other hand, there is Mohammed Ali Jinnah who always instigated the Muslims for a separate nation i.e. Pakistan. Maulana Azad in his speech says that he is proud of being an Indian Muslim. He makes clear in his speech that India is multicultural so people of different cultures, religions, castes, races will have to live amicably. On the basis of above arguments, Prof. Sarwar observes that Maulana Azad was a true representative for Indian Muslims than that of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Prof. Sarwar claims that the Indian Muslims are as faithful and loyal towards India as Hindus by stating that, "You can understand why some Indian Muslims are more viscerally anti-Pakistan than many Hindus, especially North Indian Hindus with their romanticized nostalgia for the good old days before partition" (109).

Tharoor intention is to represent Professor Sarwar as a true Indian patriot. He loves India from the core of his heart and he can sacrifice himself for its safety. His interview with

Randy Diggs shows his patriotic attitude towards India:

I love this country from the core of my heart. I love it not just because I was born here, as my father and mother were rather I love India because I know it, I have studied its history, I have breathed its polluted air, I have written words to its music. India shaped me, my mind, my tastes, my friendships, my passions. (112)

After R. C. Gupta and Prof. Mohammed Sarwar, Shashi Tharoor presents the conversation between Lakshman and Priscilla Hart, to show what he thinks about religion and communalism. Lakshman, a secular minded Indian, believes in peace, prosperity and unity of India. He states that, "If the Muslims of the 1520's acted out of ignorance and fanaticism, should Hindus act the same way in the 1990's? By doing what you purpose to do. You will hurt the feelings of the Muslims of today" (146). Lakshman presents his view that Muslims should not be assaulted for what happened in the past. He is well acquainted with the planned politics behind the Ram Sila Poojan. He believes that the Hindus should not do wrong with the Muslims for whatever wrong the Muslim invaders might have done during their reign. In a speech with Priscilla, he asks and explains:

...Why should today's Muslims have to pay a price for what Muslims may have done in the past? It's just politics, Pricilla. Politicians of all faith across India seek to mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities. By seeking votes in the name of religion, caste, and region, they have urged voters to define themselves on these lines. (145)

Thus, according to Shashi Tharoor, the main reason behind communal violence and riots in India is to fulfil some political benefits. Lakshman further tries to establish unity between the Hindus and Muslims. In one of his conversations with Priscilla he says:

The Hindus could be right. There could have been a temple there at Ayodhya over which

Babar built a mosque. But, it is rather uncivil for Hindus, of the present enlightened age to repeat what the Muslims of the sixteenth century did in a fit of ignorance and fanaticism. Such act could only provoke violence and damage the image of the Hindus not only in India but all over the world. (146)

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