

## Upending Temporality to Timeless: Unleashing Religio-Political Furore via Cinematic Rendition of *Tamas*

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### Abstract

Arguably, politics is as old as religion and so is the conflation of the two. And therefore, hand in hand since the time immemorable, religion and politics and the vice versa have had a conflation conflict at times, and conflation nexus the other days, so much so that the religion has been serving as a primary resource for politics. Various artforms and artifacts have been serving to delve deeper into the complementary relation of the two. On this chain, the cinematic representation of the novella *Tamas* serves as an enabler to re-read, such an ugly nexus, very insightfully. The aesthetic ability of the film overshadows the temporality of the oft-discussed theme of communal politics, imparts it a timeless stature and makes it an epitome of the politics of polarization. Something that was true at the time *Tamas* was written, unfortunately continues to be the same even after decades. It won't be untrue, ostensibly, if one labels the central communal-political theme of the novel to be true for future as well. Such is the impact of religion in the political arena since ages. In this series, this paper underlines the undercurrent of the institutionalized violence consolidated by the cinematic rendition of *Tamas*.

**Keywords:** Partition, religious-radicalism, politics, cinema, institutionalized violence

Scripted in 1973, decades after the repugnant Partition ruction that left the deep scars on the psyche of the masses, *Tamas* couldn't be a spontaneous emotional outburst. On the contrary, it seems to be a well-thought out and pondered-over expression of the pain being lingered at the back of mind. In the same vein, the cinematic rendition of *Tamas* later in the year 1988 is rendered as an attempt to play the politics of polarization to gain political mandate. The political critiques are of the view that such a filming have layers of objectives onto it. A pertinent

question in this regard was, “Why *Tamas*, why now?”<sup>1</sup>, especially decades after the Partition furors. Concertedly, the cinematic capturing of the same was tagged as an attempt to dig the dead. The scars that were made peace with, being triggered again doesn't seem to be innocent, rather there was a political side to it. The central theme of *Tamas* is the communal ruckus that triggered the politics of hatred. Something that was true decades ago, is true to the time we are living through, and unanimously it appears to prevail for quite a long time in near and distant future as well.

Cinema is aptly called the animated form of literature. It imparts life-like status to emotions written in words. And this anthropomorphizing ability of cinema has imparted *Tamas* a timeless stature from being a temporal experience, otherwise meant for some timely and temporal recreation activity. Having stated the colossal significant of literature and cinema as being a reservoir for the capturing of the Partition incidents and the representation of the same as a warning for the future generation on one hand, and the inhumane character flaws for power-brokers at the cost of moral values on the other, now I proceed to cite *Tamas* a novel-cum-miniseries as one of the masterpieces that encompasses the underling aspects of the event of Partition of India.

There have been numerous attempts of literary cartography that implies the recording strategies of the Partition mayhem, serving as a significant contribution in one way or the other, but the entirety of the episode that forms the backdrop of Partition episode- as being a religious projection for instance- is to be seen in the formation of *Tamas*, a novella by Bhisham Sahni. It acquires the stature of a prime example for representing the intrinsic and extrinsic elements that went on to shape the entire Partition episode, and thereby becomes a fine example of representing the ‘universal connotations’ of the Partition of India. The story of *Tamas* serves as a mosaic that incorporates the minutest of the elements that forms the Partition mayhem. The readers/audiences are enabled to comprehend the small elements as well as the grooming of the same as being the colossal reason for the formation of the Partition cataclysm. All the questions regarding the Partition of India 1947 are limited within the literary representation of *Tamas* as a novel, and thereby serves as a miniature corpus for the entire Partition experiences; ranging from religious to social and political intentions hidden behind the Partition affliction. *Tamas* serves as a huge reservoir, in the face of a small novella, that incorporates the episode in its entirety, and thus enabling the readers/ audiences to comprehend the minutest of the details.

From the idealistic approach of characters like Bhakshi ji and Jarnail, who wishes for a unified India, the novel exposes the hypocrisy and hollowness of the political parties. On the other hand, this all-encompassing narrative manoeuvre exposes the duality of the religious claim of upholding the moral values by characters like Ranvir whose tender minds have been trained upon the bases of fundamentalism, and also underlines the humane values residing within the hearts of characters like Rajo, who against her kins sanctioning, provides shelter to a Sikh couple, Harman and Banto. Thus, this miniseries serves as a collage that stands for the

complexities of the various role played by individuals, few being fundamentalists on one hand, and others as the flagbearers of the moral values. In the light of the compassions shown by the characters like Rajo through her selfless act of providing shelter to Harman and his wife Banto, *Tamas* can be read as a fine projection upholding the humanistic values. It also projects the binding of neighborhood love as a deep-down feeling, but eventually been thrashed to pieces on the urge of fundamentalist bent of mind and religious zealot when the instance of a Muslim scholar is depicted in the miniseries. The seemingly communal coherence of the Hindus with Muslims is found in a realistic structure when *Shakuntala*, a translated work in Urdu by a Muslim scholar is set on fire by the Hindu rioters. The assurance of the Muslim scholar not to feel unsafe amongst their Hindu neighbors along with his family members, is meted out to unholy mess with the infamous act of burning one's own religious scriptures. The bearing of the incident assures the zealot which was hidden deep down. The burning incident also projects the impression of the diverse coexistence through the safe feeling in the heart of the Muslim scholar, even amongst the Hindu neighbors; for the 'burning incident' triggers the religions tension. The rhetorical question like, how can caring people, friends of long ages be converted to foes, underlines the traditional camaraderie of diverse coexistence. The political reading of the novel does allude to the feelings that are quite opposite to the hermetic world, as depicted in the case of Rajo and the Muslim scholar, who maintains the humane decency. There is a hidden conveying of the impression that the country was truncated due to the self-obsessed interest of the national leaders. Bakshiji, a devout Gandhian and Jarnail Singh as being delineated a revolutionary, one of them got shot at the end, becomes the mouth piece of the power-brokers who gain power at an expense of the compromising with the moral values.

*Tamas* has another side to it, if read as a critique of the British Colonial rule, where the masculine attitude of Richard, the Deputy Commissioner, is brought to the account through feminine subjectivity. Richard's wife Lisa is depicted upset for his absence of responsiveness at the mounting tension created upon the communal hostility when Nathu was made the scapegoat to kill a pig, and drag it before the mosque to hurt the Muslim sentiments and thereby bringing the entire episode within the communal hatred. Richard did not deploy the military forces even at the request of local political leaders so as to curb and control the growing religion tussle, and neglect the matter imposing natives as being 'barbaric lots.' His wife Lisa demonstrates the subjective empathy akin by her helplessness at the attitude of her husband, but she did provide an instance of moral responsiveness by her decision to volunteer the riot-affected masses even against the wishes of her husband Richard. The callous attitude of the British who ruled India, and their 'divide and rule policy' could be traced through the absence of responsiveness of Richard, where they harbor a sense of barbarisms and uncivilized attitude against the local natives. The paradox lies in the fact that they did appreciate the cultural bounding of Indian reality, but had to neglect it for securing their own purpose of ruling such culturally rich land. At the moments of the mounting tensions due to ethnic and religious differences, Richard is seen at an excavation totally engrossed with an ancient Sanskrit text, and thus testimonies the Indian

literary richness. His scholarly perusal of ancient Indian literature and history akin by his mounting interest for Indian literary taste, underlines their acceptance of interest on Indian site. And yet, neglecting the request of local political leaders to deploy forces for controlling the communal tension, indicates his inherent attitude that the Indians can't manage in the absence of Western rulers, as if.

*Tamas* can also be read as a fine example of how the power-brokers had been conniving to serve their personal agenda. The miniseries is a powerful commentary of how the political leaders had served their purpose by fueling the religious sentiments of diverse masses, sharing the common platform even after the disparate ethnic and religious bent of minds since ages. In this context, the innocent Nathu is made the scapegoat, who is made to kill the pig and brought before the mosque for fueling the religious sentiments of Muslims, while schemers watch the episode as the riots unfold from the periphery bringing poor Nathu at the center. Once the riots ended, the opportunists who fueled the politics of polarization are seen bargaining the value of the property left behind by the displaced masses. Thus, it is clearly pictured through the miniseries that the strategy adopted by the politicians and power hangers is totally the backdrop against which the Partition episode took place- who bargained their share of power and property in the wake of Indian Partition. Their attitude to loot and plunder the Indian site was not unlike the attitudes of the British colonial rulers. In the wake of such incidents taking place in the course of the novel, it could be safely asserted that, "[.....] without blaming anyone by name the miniseries strongly conveys the impression that Partition was orchestrated by self-observed national leaders interested in carving out their own spheres of influence."<sup>2</sup> The Partition mayhem had sown a seed of discord and mistrust among the masses affiliated to different religious groups, those who had been living together for ages, and *Tamas* in this regard, server as an epitome of mistrust where Lalaji could not trust Fatehdin and other Muslim neighbors. The breakdown of harmony amongst the disparate religious ethnicity is underlined when Lalaji chose to move out of the Muslim neighbors leaving behind his male servant Nanku ostensibly to take care of his home.

*Tamas* also provides an insight into the fact that it was an overall Partition ambience wrapped with religious zealot that pushed the decent individuals into communal hatred. It was the communal stress taking place around the cultured and well-behaved masses, totally ignorant of the communal affiliations, that shaped their inner beings by making them communal externally at least. Deep down their hearts they were not religious zealots. One such example *Tamas* provides is the character of Shahnawaz, and what makes him different from others, is the ambivalent position that takes place within the recesses of his mind before killing Nanku, a servant who is left behind to take care of home when Lalaji leaves to take shelter at a Hindu friend's home out of the fear of communal disharmony taking place all around. Shahnawaz khan escorts the family of Lalaji across the communally-tensed area. When discovered by the wife of Lalaji that she had forgotten her precious jewelry box behind at her home, it was Shahnawaz who agreed to bring it from there. Taunted by his Muslim fellowmen at his attitude of extending

help to a Hindu family, Shahnawaz did not mind- but the mournful site of a dead body hovered by the voices of loss in an adjacent mosque, fueled up the angst and emotions of Shahnawaz. He could not resist his inner voice and forgot his inherent decency as being a human being first than a Muslim, and violently kills the poor chap Nanku out of his communal rage that took birth in him by the mournful gatherings around the dead body of a Muslim. This was the sight of his own people, their mourning voices that triggered a communal response in him, and out of no control over his cognitive dissonance, he kills Nanku underling the extended pressure to be communal; nevertheless, he is projected as a fine example of secularism, a sight of decency and not a religious zealot by any means. The after-incidents of facial expressions of Shahnawaz conveys his discomfort and a sense of bewilderment, and his “struggle dramatizes the predicament of all the people who finds themselves bound to others by ties forged through the interactions and exchange of everyday life”<sup>3</sup> and Shahnawaz’s sense of repentance “becomes the exteriorization of his own torment, of the unbearable irony of his position in a fissured society.”<sup>4</sup>

As one of the major concerns of this paper, the example of women community ought to be underlined here, how the Sikh religiosity and a sequence of series that depicts climatic sacrifice of Sikh women, who chose to die by jumping into a well for the sake of protecting the community’s honor. More than the religious concerns of the Hindus and the Muslims, this is the Sikh religious sentiments that amounts to the mounting events, so much so that the traumatic experiences of women to embrace death for protecting community’s honor is depicted via Jasbir, the daughter of Harman and Banto, and thereby underling the centrality of the religious faith of Sikh community in the Partition episode. The suicide episode of the miniseries by Jasbir and other Sikh women following her, brings forth the valiant traditions of religious sentiments in Indian religious structure; wherein Jabir in a state of religious ecstasy jumps into the well in the wake of an attack on Gurudwara by Muslim marauders. Bhasham Sahni in the wake of such events did not use consoling phrases, and that is how his discomfort depicted at such seemingly acts of heroism and self-sacrifice. Emulating example down the history, from the heroic act of women to embrace death as a means of protecting the honor of community, seems to have interpreted as an act of escapism, and thus “no consoling phrases about heroic self-sacrifice and the valorization of the death as martyrdom”<sup>5</sup> is used by Sahni hinting the fact that such meaningless steps taken under the religious ecstasy is “one of the numerous meaningless deaths; another obscene scandal.”<sup>6</sup>

Bhasham Sahni’s criticism about such seemingly heroic sacrifices could be roughly interpreted as being the fact that he himself had been the witness to Partition tragedy, and had seen the grimness of Partition in his absolute consciousness in its naked forms. And thus, feels the act of embracing death, either by one’s own choice or under the pressure of community as a means of protecting honor, or may be as an escapism at large. That is why he seems to have dealt, with this heroic act of committing suicide frontally as an issue, that ventures in rather than venturing out of the problem, not as a solution but quite a pessimistic and a total despondent idea. Thus, it is observed that, “[.....] *Tamas* invokes the connections without interrogation or

critique. In particular, it reiterates a deeply problematic conception of gender and sexuality—namely women’s purity is essential to the strength and honor of a society.”<sup>7</sup> The other instance of such heroic act is seen through the conversation, quite lovingly and yet ironically cruel, of Harman – quite a compassionate and genteel creature – who repeatedly tells his wife Banto that he would slay her if the rioters attack before killing himself. What *Tamas* leaves the readers/audience wonder about is the quintessential question- whether or not women in such a situation really prefer death as a final solution? What Sahni seems to invoke through the silence of Banto that it was not out of choice to embrace death, but under the pressure of masculine subjectivity that crushes even the idea of life when it comes to the options and choices that women are left with. *Tamas* in this regard makes parallel with the incisive theme of *Khamosh Pani* where Ayesha chose to live a life on an alien land, embracing a religion of the ‘other man’ in order to live off her life, and not ending it even at the cost of compromising with the disparate religious and cultural affiliations. *Tamas* invokes such hidden ideas by maintaining the silence of characters like Banto. Urvashi Butalia is of the view that women become the worst sufferer in any conflict, whether communal or otherwise, and *Tamas* as if, anticipates this lesson decades ago. The agony and pain of the suffering during and in the aftermath of Partition ruckus is epitomized by the women sufferer.

The act of heroic martyrdom in *Tamas* is trivialized when a man takes off the golden jewelry from the dead wife’s body. Bhisham Sahni through such metaphors indicates the idea of triviality of such martyrdom by pushing one’s own daughters and wives into the realm of death to protect the honor of community. The act of taking off gold jewelry is the metaphor that reaches out to the fact that material over life is not immaterial. *Tamas* ends with a pessimistic note with military planes flying over, imposition of curfew, the deployment of soldiers and a building up of peace committee by men of different religious faith and things like that, and thus serves as a sharp sarcasm over the settling down of such politically invoked events. *Tamas* glimpses into all the minutest elements that went into the making of Partition event ranging from political, social, cultural and religious invocations, and thus attains a stature of an all-encompassing miniature of the otherwise huge Partition tragedy. Synonymously, the Partition-beast bears various facets of cruelties and Govind Nihalini has aptly consolidated the varied range of emotions in the rendition of *Tamas*.

### **Conclusion**

*Tamas* serves as a unidimensional blueprint of the communal political system whatsoever. A quick skim through the communal political events since the post-partitioned India, would amount it to a bulk. Yet another chapter on the series of the communal riots was added in 2020 latest, infamously known as ‘Delhi Riots’. To look back and skim through, one would largely be reminded of the major communal riots as ‘Calcutta Riots’, ‘Gujrat Riots’, ‘Aligarh Riots’, ‘Moradabad Riots’, ‘Meerut Riots’, ‘Bombay Riots’, ‘Delhi Riots etc. to name a few, as if the

communal riot chapters in Indian Politics is akin to each other. Synonymously, institutionalized communalism and the sponsored riots don't seem to be untrue.

Often enough, women become the worst sufferer in any social upheaval. This was carried forward by the Partition tragedy as well. Ostensibly, the reflection of feminism as a moment is visible in almost all the disciplines and so do in films. In this series, *Tamas* brings forth the worst of the atrocities women meted out during and in the aftermath of the Partition mayhem. Albeit a critique of the post-partition plight of the women in the cinematic arena has not been attempted much, and therefore this article has underlined the same along with other facets of cruelty that goes into the making of it. *Tamas* seeks to highlight the harsh realities ranging from the disintegration of the cultural syncretism, gendered violence, religious radicalism, jingoism, gendered ethnicization, communal violence etc. during and in the aftermath of the British-India Partition. Whereas the atrocities of the Partition catastrophe are manifold, and each one in its ugliest form, yet the repercussion of the same rendered onto the womenfolk is the worst of its kind. The saga of the women suffering and the breakdown of the cultural syncretism, that otherwise constitute the very soul of Indian reality as a society, during the Partition mayhem, runs parallel to the short-term expediency at an expense of long-term deprivation and political demagoguery of the power mongers. *Tamas*, quite incisively, reflects all such rigmaroles of the post partitioned India engulfed by the rhetoric of communal violence and thereby cultural disintegration.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Sarkar, Bhaskar (2010), "Tamas and the Limits of Representation", *Mourning the Nation*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd, p.233.

<sup>2</sup>Sarkar, Bhaskar, *Op. Cit.*, p.238.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p.244.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p.244

<sup>5</sup>Bhalla, Alok, "Moral Action in Times of Duragraha: The Representation of the Sikhs in Partition Fiction", *Op. Cit.*, p.126.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>7</sup>Sarkar, Bhaskar (2010), "Tamas and the Limits of Representation", *Mourning the Nation*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd, p.247.

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