

Ramifications of Religious Intolerance and Indian Nation: Tharoor's *Riot*

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ABSTRACT

Literature and the nation are inextricably linked. A discipline that originates from a philosophical tradition developed with the notion of the country is the study of literature. Since Bhabha claims that the country and narration are comparable, literary tales have a deep connection to the idea of the nation. The real inspiration for Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* was the 1992 religious disturbances. These riots between Hindus and Muslims took place to "correct a grievous injustice" from four hundred and sixty years before. But these riots were sparked mainly by political unrest. Politicians appeal to voters on particular religious, caste, and geographic grounds. The current essay examines how a regular person might become a victim of riots between groups of people without their fault and how, during such fights, national integrity is threatened and overlooked. A man without a country seems like an impossibility. Love for humankind is the only remedy for violence. "Distracting interventions" can only be overcome by forgiving and moving forward. India was a nation before 1947, it is a nation presently and prediction can be made based on present situation that it will survive as a nation despite the 'disruptive interventions'.

Keywords: *Riot, Shashi Tharoor, Ramjanmbhoomi, Hinduism, Religious Intolerance*

Nation and Literature share a covalent bond. Literary narratives have an intrinsic relationship with the concept of the nation; as Bhabha says that nation and narration are analogous. The narrative of Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* is mainly based on 1992 religious riots, one of the major upheavals on the name of religion in post-independent India after the Babri Masjid Demolition on 6 December 1992. These were Hindu-Muslim riots and happened to 'right a great wrong' of Four Hundred and Sixty Years ago. But mainly, these riots were provoked politically. Politicians appeal to voters on narrow grounds of religion, caste and region.

The author Tharoor's oeuvre is a long one being a versatile personality. His works are *India: From Midnight to the Millenium and Beyond*, *The Great Indian Novel*, *An Era of Darkness*, *The Elephant*, *The Tiger*, and *the Cell Phone*, *Nehru: The Invention of India*, *Why I am a Hindu*, *Bookless in Baghdad: Reflections, Literature, Writing and Writers*, *Riot*, *The Five Dollar Smile: And Other Stories*, *Show Business*, *Tharoorosaurus*, *The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism*, *Partition*, *The Hindu Way: An Introduction to Hinduism*, *The Paradoxical Prime Minister: Narendra Modi and His India*, *Indien: Zwischen Mythos and Moderne*, *Reasons of State*, *Kerala*, *God's Own Country*, *Pax Indica: India and the world of the 21st Century*, *Shadows Across the Playing Field*, *India Shastra: Reflections on the World's Largest*

Democracy in the 21st Century and India Shastra: Reflections on the Nation in Our Time. The novel *Riot* is written in epistolary style, with diary writings, newspaper reporting, and discourses. It flaunts the basic conventions of a novel. Tharoor bases the episodes of Zalilgarh on an unpublished account of a riot in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh told by his friend Harsh Mander. But in the Khargone riots, no foreigner was killed. The rest of the characters and storyline are also fictional.

The present paper explores how an ordinary person becomes a victim of communal riots without no fault of his/her and national integrity is challenged and put in oblivion at such communal clashes on the forefront of the nation. *Riot* is a recasting of History, contemporary politics and discourses on Hinduism and Islam, Partition of India, solid advocacies for each construction of Lord Rama's Temple and demolition of Babri mosque. The origin of this rift can be traced from this textual quote:

Not just the basics-how the British promoted divisions between Hindus and Muslims as a policy of "divide and rule," how the nationalist movement tried to involve everybody, but the Muslim League broke away and called for a state of Pakistan, how the country was partitioned in 1947 to give the Muslims a separate state, etc. etc.- (Tharoor 21)

The roots of communalism in India have already been laid down in British India under the 'divide and rule' policy. As a result, the post-Independence era is a witness to communal fights, whether it is Hindu-Muslim (1992, 2002) or Hindu- Sikh (1984) riots. In the 1992 riots, Babri Masjid became a site for the tussle for power and dominance by men of Hindu and Muslim communities.

In these riots, history repeats itself after eight years as the Anti-Sikh riots happened in 1984. After Independence 1984, anti-Sikh riots tore apart the nation, and the Sikh community, after coming to consciousness of their ethnicity, started to prepare for a separate Sikh state. 1984 Anti-Sikh riots, also referred to as the 1984 Anti-Sikh Pogrom or Massacre, were four days of violence in Northern India, particularly Delhi, during which armed mobs belonging to the Indian National Congress killed unarmed Sikh men, women and children, looted and set fire to Sikh homes, businesses and schools and attacked Gurdwaras. In *Riot* Gurinder, the District SP also discusses the Sikh Riots. He calls 1984 a terrible year for the bloody national vintage. These are rooted in Operation Blue Star, which removed Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his allies, who were hidden in the Golden Temple with arms. Their demand is a separate Sikh State. The Indian Army enters Temple premises to expatriate them. However, it happened at the cost of hundreds of innocent Sikhs, pilgrims, and ordinary fringing worshippers who were

in the temple at the time and lost their lives. To end the Bhindranwale terror, too much damage was done. Then angry Sikhs vow to revenge on those who had done this. The Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, is their Primary target. On one cold morning, when she was going for a TV interview in her back garden, two of her Sikh bodyguards opened fire on her. It again instils seeds of revenge in the admirers of Mrs Gandhi, and the result was slaughtered, arson and looting Sikh neighbourhoods were destroyed, families butchered, and homes were set on fire. The rioters' motto was "Blood for Blood".

Even the ashes of the Sikh massacre were not extinct. The Hindu- Muslim riots germinated on the very issue of Babri Masjid-Ramjanmbhoomi. Here the character who becomes a victim of these Riots is Priscilla Hart, who comes to India on a health Mission, i.e. population control from the US and works here with an NGO named HELP-US. She is murdered by the aggressive mob divided into the lines of community on Monday, 2 October 1989, in Zalilgarh town in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where she works. Zalilgarh is a sweltering, dusty, filthy and crowded city. 'It was dusk, that time of the day in rural India' when the kerosene lamps are lit and the mosquitoes emerge to prey on the unwary. That Saturday, 30 September, Priscilla Hart, 24, had said goodbye to her friends. [Tharoor 5]

India is a multicultural society that assimilates in nature and is known for its 'unity in diversity.' A foreign death in India was a question of the peaceful identity of the Indian nation. It got published in the American newspaper The New York Journal on Monday, 2 October 1989 as American Slain in India and reported, "A rioting mob attacked and killed an American woman in a town east of New Delhi yesterday...No other foreigner has died in the sectarian violence that has killed several hundred Indians in the last three weeks...". On 3 October, it said Death of an Idealist and reported, "To Priscilla Hart's family, relatives, friends and professors here in New York, the death of the idealistic 24-year-old volunteer and scholar in a riot in India was a heartbreakingly tragic event." On Wednesday, 4 October 1989 it reported as Parents Plan to Visit India to View Site of Daughter's Death, "We want to talk to her friends and colleagues, the people she worked with, to see where she was," her father Rudyard Hart, said in a telephone interview from his home...". On Monday, 16 October 1989 it was reported as An American Death in India saying, "That Saturday, 30 September Priscilla Hart, 24, had said goodbye to her friends, because in a few days she would be packing her bags to return to New York University." On 10 October 1989 his parents, though estranged because of her father's extramarital affair, Mr and Mrs Hart come to India to enquire about his death. Her mother cannot come to terms with her loss. She calls her "her own contribution to the future of the

world.” His father, who loves her a lot, reminisces the time spent with her daughter. They visited Zalilgardh. Here the extension worker of HELP-US Kadambri takes them to Priscilla’s place. They find the place as bad as they feared. The sights there bring in their mind East, an image of West. But they could not find out the reason for their daughter’s killing, unaware she was a victim of religious violence. Though from the last interview of Laxman by Mr Diggs with Harts, Priscilla’s Parents, we come to know of his death at Kotli, their meeting place. The District Police finds her body there. Although, her assailants used the place as a store for bombs. “It looks like Priscilla had the misfortune to go to that place when her assailants chose to use it. The killers probably thought she’d report them to the Police. They had to kill her to ensure her silence” (Tharoor 237). The mystery of her death is revealed at the novel's very end. She was killed by Ali, the municipal driver, by stabbing a knife, as it gets revealed by Gurinder, the SP. She plans to leave on coming Tuesday from Zalilgarh but she gets killed on Monday. Due to suspicion, Priscilla’s mother secretly wants to know from Laxman about their affair but Laxman denies it. But from one of Priscilla’s letters, she confirms that it was Laxman for whom her daughter has a likeness.

Although India is known for religious tolerance, it is a mark of intolerance on the face of India across borders.

In the town she was leaving behind, passions were riding high. The Hindu militants had organized a mammoth procession, some 30000 strong, in a town of just 100000 to take consecrated bricks through the centre of Zalilgarh to a collection point. From there, the bricks would be transported to Ayodhya, where the Hindus hoped to use them to construct a temple, the Ramjanmbhoomi, on a disputed site occupied by a disused Sixteenth-century mosque, the Babri Masjid. [Tharoor 5]

The town of Zalilgardh is “communally hypersensitive”, which means people have an extreme affinity to their religion and they consider it supreme. Priscilla comes to know about India and Indian society, culture and history from Laxman. He explains her the five primary sources of division in India- language, region, caste, class and religion. However, religion is the one which makes a person work towards good deeds.

Hinduism is great for encouraging social peace because everyone believes their suffering in this life is the result of misdeeds in the past one. Their miseries in this world will be addressed in the next if only they’d shut up and be good and accept things as they are, injustices included. So, Hinduism is the best antidote to Marxism. It is interesting, in fact, how many of the leading

communists before the partition were Muslims because of their natural predisposition to egalitarianism. And Brahmins, because they had a natural affinity for dictatorships, even of the proletariat. (Tharoor 43-44)

Religion is one of India's significant sources of division, which is responsible for interruptions and disintegrating national unity. Marxist thinker Karl Marx called religion ‘the opium of people. When the masses show too much affinity to it, it becomes communalism and consequently becomes communal clashes.

But religion also breeds what this country calls “communalism”- the sense of religious chauvinism that transforms itself into bigotry and sometimes violence against the followers of other faiths. Now we have practically every religion on earth represented on Indian soil, with the possible exception of Shintoism. So we’ve seen various kinds of clashes in our history – Hindu- Muslim, Muslim- Sikh, and Sikh – Hindu, Hindu- Christian. (Tharoor 43-44)

Although, religion is entirely a personal affair in India. The Indian nation has no declared religion for its citizens. They are granted religious freedom in articles 25-28 of the Indian constitution as a basic fundamental right. That’s why it is also called secular state. Whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddha, or Parsi, religion doesn’t teach fanaticism. Every religion considers all human beings equal. Founders of various religions like Muhammad, Guru Nanak, Buddha, Mahavira propounded humanitarianism. Even for Gandhiji, father of the nation, religion was an identification with mankind. As Laxman also puts the fact that his “father exemplified the Hindu idea that religion is an intensely personal matter” (Tharoor 143). He also claims that Hinduism never claims to be the only true religion, unlike Christianity, Islam and Judaism. On the other hand, Laxman and Priscilla meet at the secret place called Kotli, a haunted place, in the evening and engage in love-making. He questions Hindus who call themselves secular, then why the very act of demolition was done:

I understand Hindus who see a double standard at work here. Muslims say they are proud to be Muslim, Sikh say they are proud to be Sikh, Christians say they are proud to be Christian, and Hindus say they are proud to be ...secular. (Tharoor 146)

To clarify this, the reporter Randy Diggs approaches local Hindu chauvinist Ram Charan Gupta. He writes about the happening of Babri Masjid Demolition that “it was to the right a great wrong.” He blames Muslims and calls them “converts from the Hindu Faith of their ancestors. He alleges that they were responsible for dividing the country to create Pakistan. He asserts his faith in his traditions, gods, and worth by rebuilding the Ram Janmbhoomi temple even at the cost of human lives. Muslim aspect is presented by Professor Mohammed Sarwar, who works at old Delhi University teaching in the History Department. He is here to research

on Syed Salar Masaud Ghazi, popularly known as Ghazi Miyan. He points that there's no evidence for the historicity of the Ram Janambhoomi claims. As Professor Mohammad Sarwar writes to Laxman:

The Hindutva brigade is busy trying to invent a new past for the nation, fabricating historical wrongs they want to the right, dredging up “evidence” of Muslim malfeasance and misappropriation of national glory. They are making us into a large-scale Pakistan; they are vindicating the two-nation theory. They know not what damage they are doing to the fabric of our society. They want to “teach” people like me “a lesson”, though they have not learned many lessons themselves. (67)

Professor Sarwar advocates for Muslims' outlook towards India as well intended. By quoting Maulana Azad, the first Education Minister of India, who confessed that “every fibre of my being revolted” against the thought of dividing India into communal lines. “I could not conceive it possible for a Musulman to tolerate this unless he has rooted out the spirit of Islam from every corner of his being” (Tharoor 107). He assumes himself incomplete without India. Mohammed Sarwar names all the Muslim dignitaries, such as Mohammed Currim Chagla, the then foreign minister in 1965, and editor M J Akbar, all are supporting the Indian cause. He blames Hindu chauvinists for playing with religion. He questions whether history could be rewritten without doing violence to the inheritors of the old. Professor Sarwar expresses his deep underlying love for India: “I love it because I know it, I have studied its history, I have travelled its geography, I have breathed its polluted air, and I have written words to its music. India shaped me, my mind, my tastes, my friendships, my passions” (Tharoor 112).

In his interview with Randy Diggs, the South Asian correspondent of the New York Journal, Lakshman mentions that Priscilla had nothing to do with the Hindu-Muslim nonsense. He adds that communal clashes are “mostly local, such as attacks on religious processions, desecration of shrines, illicit relationships between men and women of different communities, and so on.” From Priscilla's letters to her friend Cindy Valeriani, we come to know that she has a love affair with the district magistrate Mr Laxman. Both Priscilla and Laxman meet every Tuesday and Saturday at the secret place Kotli. His wife Geetha remains unaware of her husband's affair with a foreign girl whom she has already met. He opines to Priscilla a balanced viewpoint by saying, “the Hinduism that I know understands that faith is a matter of hearts and minds, not of bricks and stone. Build Ram in your heart and minds, the Hindu is enjoined; and if Ram is in your heart, it will matter little where else he is or is not.” (Tharoor 145)

Lastly, Gurinder informs Geetha about Laxman's love affair with Priscilla and his plan to leave his wife. Her wife goes to Swamiji and asks him to perform a special pooja to prevent his husband from the spell of that foreign woman. Her prayers are answered as Priscilla loses her life being a riot victim.

Randy Diggs also interviews Laxman's friend Gurinder Singh, the superintendent of Police, regarding the happening of violence in the name of religion. He mentions the frenzied Hindu mob in long processions sloganeering and how he and his team tried to control them. Laxman also puts his efforts into curbing the riot. But it happened due to the daggers and some other weapons carried by the mob; resultantly, six Hindus died. As a result, a curfew was imposed. Retaliating this, Muslims threw a bomb, killing one Hindu on the scene. The eighth one is neither Hindu nor Muslim. It is Priscilla's. Laxman is very upset as he can't sleep for three nights and thinks of quitting his job, but Gurinder boosts his morale and helps him change his psyche.

The 1995 Hindi film *Naseem* (The Morning Breeze), directed by Saeed Akhtar Mirza, was filmed on the 1992 Babri Masjid Demolition. There is a 1992 documentary *Ram Ke Naam* (English: In the Name of God) directed by Anand Patwardhan. The film explores the campaign waged by the Hindu-nationalist Vishva Hindu Parishad to build a Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the communal violence triggered. A couple of months after *Ram ke Naam* was released, VHP activists demolished the Babri Masjid in 1992, further violence. As Nandan Nilkeni well points it out in his book *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation*:

National imagination has often been challenged by incessant focus on caste and religious identities. The reason behind it that "our reservation policies and vote-bank politics encouraged Indians to fence themselves in within their own communities, people begin to see themselves belonging to their caste or religion first, and country second, a dangerous theme in a nation so diverse." (Nilkeni 162)

Indian nation with diverse cultures, religions and languages was under colonial rule. Contrary to the European model of nationalism, which took for granted the existence of one faith, one language or ethnicity was doomed to failure. Having a sense of Indianness or considering themselves part of the Indian nation in Imagination, Indian writers began to imagine cultural unity through their fictional and poetic works. By the 1920s and 1930s, literature had become a central role in the Indian nationalist movement. Even after independence, literary writings and Indian cinema portrayed and reflected every growth to every upheaval of Indian history

till today as the Indian nation faced many “disruptive interventions” from the 1947-Partition of India to 2014 Meerut & Saharanpur riots.

Literary narratives also reflect the portraiture of nation as it moves with the plot lying in the writer's imagination. The novel riot also portrays the re-imagination of the Indian Nation as there happened Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992 in the Indian subcontinent. Although the Indian Nation is heterogeneous in nature, i.e. multicultural identities, people assume they are part of India as the nation exists in their imagination. National symbols also play an essential role in imagining a nation. As written by Literary theorist Prof P K Nair, Indian people sitting in India watching their flag furling overseas in some Olympic match or Cricket match feel attached to the nation, and a sense of belongingness comes to them, whether Hindu or Muslim or Sikh or Christian. A similar thing happens with soldiers fighting for their country. They fight for their land irrespective of their religion, caste or community. The nation is first to them. This shared feeling is sometimes broken by fundamentalist powers which intervene in a disruptive way in the progressively moving pace of the country. “To be Indian is to be part of an elusive dream we all share, a dream that fills our minds with sounds, words, flavours from many sources that we cannot easily identify.” (Tharoor 145)

The Indian nation that emerged in the Post-Independence period is undoubtedly young, new, and modern. Indian nation, which resulted from anti-colonial nationalism, incorporated Gandhian nationalism into it, which takes non-violence as its pivotal point. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* – are it's the best examples.

Our freedom fighters have presented us Indians with great ideals of humanity, and the people, who comprise this nation, have assorted to violent ways in the name of petty differences. A wrong done four hundred and sixty years ago can't be put right by acting violently and destroying a religious edifice. As ‘if the Muslims of the 1520s acted out of ignorance and fanaticism, should Hindus act the same way in 1980s’ (Tharoor 146). If it is done, the solution for any wrong should not be ‘an eye for an eye’. They want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its revenge. (Tharoor 147)

The rich cultural heritage of India was such that even the American cold drink company was not allowed in the Indian market by the national leaders; as Priscilla Hart's father Rudyard Hart writes in one of his letters to the American News reporter Randy Diggs reveals, “No American executive had been assigned full-time by Coca-Cola to India since the early 1960s.” [Tharoor 29] Even he praises his India a lot by saying:

Besides, I wanted to go to India. I'd heard so much about the place: my parents had been missionaries there. They'd loved the whole schtick, The Taj Mahal, The Jungle Book, you name it. They'd even named me Rudyard in honour of Kipling, can you believe it? By the time I was born they had moved to China, but my parents were still so nostalgic for India that they were dreaming Bengal Lancers in the land of Pearl Buck. (Tharoor 29-30)

The only solution to violence is love for humanity. The only solution to “distracting interventions” lies in forgiving and forgetting: “Muslim invaders may indeed have destroyed Hindu temples, putting mosques in their place, but this did not- could not destroy the Indian dream” (Tharoor 145). In the words of Professor Sarwar, “the only possible idea of India is that of a nation greater than the sum of its parts. An India neither Hindu nor Muslim, but both. That is the only India that will allow them to continue to call themselves Indians” (Tharoor 116). India was a nation before 1947, it is a nation presently and prediction can be made based on present situation that it will survive as a nation despite the ‘disruptive interventions’.

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