

## **Riot: Pondering History for Communal Harmony**

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**ABSTRACT:** My attempt in this paper will focus on the riot section to examine how Tharoor has used history to unravel the politics behind the communal passion that has rocked India ever since partition in 1947. And the specific point in history that Sashi Tharoor has chosen for his purpose is the riot that reverberated in Uttar Pradesh in 1989 in the context of the Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi controversy. His intention was to revive this largely forgotten year in Indian history. In a speech to the Carnegie Council, Tharoor remarked that while writing the novel, he had benefited from an actual riot that occurred in 1989, in Khargor in Madhya Pradesh, details of which was provided to him by his classmate who, as District Magistrate was there, to handle it ("Sectarian Violence", 2001).

**KEYWORDS:** Communal violence, religion, Babri Masjid/ Ramjanmabhoomi controversy, Indian history and Politics

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Date of Submission: 05-02-2018

Date of acceptance: 23-02-2018

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### **I. Introduction**

**"History is nothing but the activity of man in pursuit of his ends"**

(Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*)

This is how Sashi Tharoor attempts to sound the key note of his novel *Riot*, whose prime agenda is apparently to seek solution for the communal unrest in India, by unravelling the contours of India's history and communal identity, by a sustained process of multiple narrations privileged through an array of diverse narrative modes. An awareness of the past and its impact on human consciousness and identity, could lend itself to a discourse that might accelerate the processes toward easing the communal impasse.

The book has two editions- one published in America and the other in India. The Indian edition from Viking has a powerful cover page that represents a scene from a 'riot' - "with flames and smoke arising from an overturned cart" (Tharoor, *The Hindu*) whilst the American one from Arcade subtitled 'A love story' has the picture of 'sunset' behind a Mughal monument. The two different editions reflect two faces of India- one defined by harsh hate and other by gentle love. The stories representing the two different strands are drawn towards the final blaze, when the communal riot that rocks Zailgarh, in Uttar Pradesh coincides with the murder of the American girl who is the protagonist in the clandestine love story traced in the book.

### **II. Unraveling The Bygone Turmoil**

Thematically, the book conjures up images of the past and informs how it is responsible for many of the communal flare-ups that define the contemporary Indian time-scape. With his deft blending of fact and fiction, Tharoor sets up a mosaic-work, to enable readers to get the whole scenario into perspective. He selects bits from history and present day communal consciousness and weaves them together with bits from his lucrative imagination to create a quilt that is "intellectually provocative and emotionally charged" (*Book Jacket Review*, Viking- Penguin). *Riot* is a brilliant experiment in narrative form. Using the framework of investigating the mysterious death of Priscilla Hart, a social worker from America during the riots, Tharoor uses the matrix of his novel to enable multiple voices to interact. And in the dialogue process that evolves and takes hold of the text, the readers themselves are drawn towards an understanding of the real issues at stake and the politics behind the communal violence and hatred in this land. Tharoor privileges many factions of the variegated Indian community to express their views and even the most fanatic ones are allowed a space to express their grievances. And using the strategy he has dared to lay bare the explosive substances from which communal conflicts are brewed. While constructing the plot, Sashi Tharoor is like a magpie that picks up bits of thread, wool, leaves and straw to make his nest. Tharoor himself has remarked that the plot of the *Riot* unfolded through "newspaper clippings, diary entries, interviews, transcripts, journals scrap books, even poems written by characters-in other words using different voices, different stylistic forms for different fragments of the story"(The Hindu 2)

The novel begins with a series of newspaper reports in the New York Journal. The first one from Delhi dated Monday October 2, 1989, reports the death of Priscilla Hart, a volunteer with the non-governmental organization HELP-US, engaged in population control awareness programme in Zaligarh. She was stabbed and beaten to death. The cause of the death is reported as obscure, though it took place at a time when there was a riot in the town between Hindus and Muslims. However the newspaper made it clear that she was not targeted because she was an American (*Riot* 1). The second report from New York, by Victor Goodman reported that her parents would fly to Zaligarh to the place where their daughter was found dead “as the only way to overcome grief over their daughter’s violent death and to confront it” (23). And the third report by Randy Diggs from Zaligarh- a more detailed one, gave details of how Priscilla Hart had bicycled to an abandoned fort-Kotli, on the Jamuna River to escape from the crowd and noise of the city, where Hindu militants had organized a major religious procession. She was there apparently to have a quiet glimpse of sunset, probably the last one before she returned to America the following week. The report also mentioned that the mammoth procession was organized by the Hindutva leaders to take the consecrated bricks through Zaligarh, to Ayodhya where they hoped to construct the Ramjanmabhoomi temple on a disputed site occupied by a disused 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque, Babri Masjid. Tempers were aflame on the eve of the great march. A few Hindu youths were stabbed, as they were putting up banners for the next day’s procession. As communal passion was seething, the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police pressurized the leaders to postpone the procession but they were not ready to withdraw. In the end procession was granted on the condition that they would not shout inflammatory slogans against Muslims and would not use cymbals and drums near mosque. They were permitted to carry placards, but arms and weapons were prohibited. The leaders agreed but when the procession began, the masses went out of control and in a frenzied mood they went to attack mosques. Timely intervention by authorities prevented a violent communal breakout. But when it came to pass that the procession would proceed without any serious untoward incident, someone hurled a bomb, (most probably Muslim Jihadis) to dismantle the procession and create havoc. The crowds ran amok and Zaligarh indulged in full-scale communal violence. Police opened fire to control the mobs and the end of the day saw eight dead and several injured in the riot.

Sashi Tharoor has made use of two distinct voices to prove how history can inflame communal passions and how it can also allay communal hatred. An analysis of Rama Charan Gupta’s views as recorded in Randy Diggs notebook would reveal how hard-core, unscrupulous ideological positions could harm Indian society by flaming up sectarian passion among the unsuspecting believers of a creed. The scheming man that he is, with eyes on the vote bank, he has no qualms in presenting an imagined version of version of history that posits Hindus of India as a wronged people. For him, September 15, 1989 was a great day- a day when the Hindutva forces launched the ‘Rama Sila Poojan Programme’. On that sanctified day, bricks inscribed ‘Ram’ were consecrated at the local shrine, to be transported to Ayodhya to rebuild the Ramjanmabhoomi temple, which was allegedly destroyed by Babar to erect his own big Mosque there. His inflammatory allegations are: “In Ayodhya there are many temples to Ram. But the most famous temple is not really a temple anymore... It is the Ramjanmabhoomi, the birth place of Ram... But if you go to the Ayodhya, you will see no Ramjanmabhoomi temple there. In olden days a great temple stood there, a magnificent temple. But a Muslim king, the Mughal emperor, Babar, not an Indian, a foreigner from central Asia, he knocked it down. And in its place, he built a big mosque named the Babri Masjid... naturally; our community was very much hurt by this... For hundreds of years we suffered under Muslim yoke. Then the British came and things were no better. We thought then that after the independence, everything would change. Most of the Muslims in Ayodhya left to go to Pakistan. The mosque was no longer much needed as a mosque. Then a miracle occurred. Some devotees found that an idol of Ram had emerged spontaneously in the courtyard of mosque. It was a clear sign from God. His temple has to be rebuilt on the sacred spot. (53)”

But the Indian government dismissed such testimonies as irrational and refused to grant permission for the temple. The temple was padlocked so that neither the Muslims nor the Hindus could worship there. It has been so since 1948. Ram Char a Gupta and other fundamentalists condemned the Government stand. And as the law and government refused to undo the “injustice”, Ram Charan and his party leaders finally said, “We have had enough. It is the peoples wish that the birthplace of Ram must be suitably honoured. We will rebuild the temple” (53). Accordingly bricks from every corner of every village were brought to be taken to Ayodhya. And as he spoke of the excitement of young men and women making flags, placards, posters and preparing “pennants in holy saffron”, on the eve of the great procession to Ayodhya, he interspersed his narration with volleys of abuse against Muslims. He tells Diggs:

“You have to understand their mentality. They are more loyal to a foreign religion Islam than to India. They are all converts from the Hindu faith of their ancestors, but they refuse to acknowledge this, pretending instead that they are all descended from conquerors from Arabia and Persia or Samarkand. Fine- if that is so let them go back to those places! Why do they stay here if they will not assimilate into our country? They stay together, pray together. It is what you, Americans, I know, call a ghetto mentality. (55)”

Another injustice Ram Charan Gupta points out has been done to Hindus by Muslims is that they divided India to create the “accursed Pakistan”. And he has venomous regret that some of the greatest sites of Hindu civilization- “the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the world’s oldest university of Takshashila, even the river Indus from which India got its name... are all now in a foreign country”(55). His words are testimony to how India’s partition and its aftermath has incited and kept communal passions aflame. Ram Charan Gupta’s volley of abuses doesn’t spare Jawaharlal Nehru, “a Muslim-loving, brown Englishman” who gave them right to follow their own personal law which privileges a Muslim to have four wives at a time. And the Hindus are angry that Muslims are paid for by the Government to visit Mecca- for the ships and planes to take them there every year. He wonders why tax paid Hindus should go helping Muslims to get closer to a foreign god (55). And the worst is that every Muslim with four wives each, are “out breeding Hindus” (55). He is angry that during emergency, Mrs. Gandhi drove young Hindu men for compulsory vasectomy, whilst Muslims resisted even voluntary family planning saying it was against their religion. The most threatening under the prevailing circumstances is that Muslims would soon outnumber Hindus in India (55). So his party’s agenda is to defeat the so called secularists who have humiliated Hindus and he adds most vociferously that until they raise “the forces of Hindutva to power” they would never able “to teach the Muslims a lesson” (57). He wants Diggs to know what Sadhvi Rithambhara, another woman Hindutva preacher had to offer, “Muslims are like a lemon squirted into the cream of India. They turn it sour. We have to remove the lemon, cut it up into pieces, squeeze out the pips and throw them away” (57). However, Professor Mohammed Sarwar’s conversation with Lakshman, the District Magistrate of Zaligarh instructs how history can be used to allay communal passions. He is for reviving Muslims of the past, who served the Indian community selflessly. Such historical researches could contribute greatly to easing off sectarian ideas among the Hindus. A liberal historian, Sara was in Zaligarh as part of his research programme on the life of Syed Salar Masud Ghasi popularly known as Ghazi Miyan who was a highly revered Muslim warrior- a saint in Zaligarh, respected by both the communities. Other Muslim figures in India, worshipped even by Hindus are Nizamuddin Auliya, Moinuddin Chishti, Shah Madar, Shaik Nasiruddin and Mohammed Iqbal who wrote the patriotic song “sare jahan se acha Hindustan hamara” (66-67). The professor does not represent Muslim opinion but he believes that historians with a secular soul have a duty to retrieve historical figures, especially Muslims from oblivion to forge Hindu-Muslim unity. Pages from the transcript of Randy Diggs interview with Prof. Mohamed Sarwar reveals that Moulana Azad was also a secular Muslim who believed in an united India and opposed its division on communal lines, whereas Mohamed Ali Jinnah, who was Oxbridge educated and who enjoyed Scotch and pork and who barely spoke Urdu, and married a non Muslim had solicited a separate nation for Muslims (107). He asserts that Moulana Azad was more authentic representative of Indian Islam than Jinnah was. He dismissed talk of partition arguing that Muslims were entitled to the whole of India from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, just as the Hindus were. He did not want to accept the Pakistani idea of “a narrower notion of Muslim nationhood that confined Indian Muslims to a truncated share of the heritage of their entire land” (109). Still, it was unfortunate that in 1947, Jinnah triumphed and not Azad. Professor Sarwar emphasizes that Muslims of India are as patriotic as their Hindu brethren.

After giving us views from both the Hindu and Muslim camps, Sashi Tharoor uses Lakshman’s conversation with Priscilla Hart, to speak out his mind. Lakshman wonders why Hinduism, an essentially tolerant faith should want to desecrate a Muslim shrine to validate itself. He wonders why Muslims are being assaulted for something that happened over four hundred and fifty years ago. He rightly remarks that it is because “politicians of all faiths across India seek to mobilize votes by appealing to narrow identities” (45). By seeking votes in the name of religion, caste and region, they have urged voters to define themselves on these lines.

Lakshman tells Priscilla that 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 narrow-mindedness could only provoke violence and tarnish the image of Hindus across the world. He feels that Hindus need to uphold the dignity of their religion by validating what Swami Vivekananda proclaimed at The World Parliament of Religions in Chicago by quoting an ancient Hindu hymn: “As the different streams have their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea. So, O Lord, the different oaths which men take... all lead to thee” (qtd. Tharoor *Riot* 146). Such sentiments need to be respected by Hindu fanatics like Ram Charan Gupta when they say that they are proud to be Hindus, for authentic Hinduism has always stood for religious tolerance.

In order to orchestrate the need for tolerance and communal harmony, Sashi Tharoor introduces another voice that links readers to another facet of India’s troubled history. In one of the many interactions between Gurinder Singh, the superintendent of Police and Randy Diggs, Gurinder Singh narrates the story why he continued to serve as a cop. It is the story of another riot in India during Indira Gandhi’s Emergency years. He remembers with unveiled poignancy the storming of Golden Temple, a place sacred to the Sikhs to flush out

terrorists who were fighting for Khalistan, a separate state for Sikhs. The assault names “Operation Bluestar” by the army, threw the temple into shambles and hurt the Sikh sentiments so deeply that even the Anti-Khalistan factions of the Sikh community rebounded in protest. Khushwant Singh reacted by returning his civilian honours to the government (192). Instead of curbing Khalistan terrorism the Golden Temple massacre abetted it, which later climaxed in the murder of Mrs. Indira Gandhi by her Sikh security guards. The assassination of the Prime Minister led to a spate of violence. Angry mobs roamed the cities in search of “Sikh blood to spill” (194). Gurinder Singh remembers how his own nephew Navjot and his father were torched to death in a car by anti-Sikh mobs. He imagines with pain the anguished face of the little boy “staring in disbelief as the flames consumed him” (195).

Gurinder Singh was so angry at what happened that he wanted to resign and join the Khalistan army to avenge his nephew’s death and also the wrongs done to the other people of his Sikh community. Had it not been for his father’s deep sense of tolerance and commitment towards communal harmony, he would have left the police force. His father’s words ring in his ears and they guide him when he is out to manage riots. His father had pointed to the smiling photograph of Navjot and remarked:

“That boy will always live in my heart”, he said softly. “But somewhere in India, there is another grandfather like me whose only hope for the safety of his grandson lies in the trust that he places in you and the policemen under your command. Do not, Gurinder, do not even betray that trust” (198).

As we read the book we traverse through a wide range of events in India’s past. In the miniature set of Zaligarh we listen to distinct voices that enable us to reach out into India’s history and the identity politics of its communal groups and see how it has shaped the politics of contemporary India. Tharoor suggests that in India Hindus and Muslims wield “history like a battle axe against each other” (205)

### **III. Conclusion**

Sashi Tharoor has attempted to contextualize India’s past to interpret and understand it better so as to redeem her present that continues to seethe in the fires of communal strife. Though religion lay at the root of the partition of India, Tharoor says that at no time did the Indian constitution endorse that India was only for the Hindus and not for Muslims. India is a country for everybody and every faith has as much a place in the Indian mosaic as the majority faith. In fact, what he seems to emphasize in his novel is that “an Indian Muslim is as an Indian Hindu” (Tharoor, “Sectarian Violence”) and should both communities believe in this, the dawn of communal harmony in India cannot be far away.

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International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 4593, Journal no. 47449.

Amrutha T V’ *Riot: Pondering History for Communal Harmony*” International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI) 7.1 (2018): PP 24-27