

VIOLENCE, RELIGION AND NATIONALITY: IDENTITY NEGOTIATION VIS-À-VIS THE IDEA OF ROOTS IN THE NOVEL 'LAJJA'

Pranjal Protim Barua
Doctoral Research Scholar
Center for English Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi, India

Abstract

The idea of communal violence is modern day anxiety especially when it threatens to question one's identity in a nation. Religion plays a decisive role in defining the way we perceive identity and link/delink ourselves with different facets of social interaction. The novel 'Lajja' provides a critical insight to the plight of the victims of communal violence and how their identity is threatened. The victims has to deal with the onerous task of strategic detachment from their 'roots', their epistemological origins, and internalise a new identity thrust upon them. It also discuss the aspect of 'pervasion of humanity' and how human lives are condemned ta a sense of fate decided upon by others. The paper will also discuss the formation of minority within the majoritarian discourse and actions. It thereby critiques the idea of obsessive violence in the name of nationalism, and how violence is unjustified under the promising garb of nationalistic fervour.

Keywords: Identity, communal violence, Lajja, detachment, roots, religion

Communal violence based on religion is something that implores upon tracing the fundamental reason of the Hindu-Muslim divide in the narrative of the novel 'Lajja.' The novel discusses the life of a Hindu household, the Dutta family caught in the animosity of communal fracture. It discusses how they Dutta family got alienatednot owing to their nationality but due to their rationality behind the decision of identifying themselves with the larger encompassing national identity over the circumscribed communal identity. But their religious identity as Hindu got pronounced louder than their identity as Bangladeshi national.

[The] social dimension of personal and collective identity formation... is based on the insight that human beings normally thrive under conditions of mutual recognition. That is, they cannot form stable personal or collective identities without 'others' recognizing them.(Dusche 84)

In the 'Preface' to the novel, TaslimaNasrinstates the reason of writing the book:

I detest fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason I wrote Lajjasoon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December, 1992. The book which took me seven days to write, deals with the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh, by the Muslims who are in the majority. It is disgraceful that the Hindus in my country were haunted by the Muslims after the destruction of the Babri Masjid. All of us, who love Bangladesh, should feel ashamed that such a terrible thing could happen in our beautiful country. ...Lajja is a document of our collective defeat. (Nasrin ix)

It is important to analyse how their identity as Hindus, which was one of the variable in the fluidic element of the idea of identity, it is more about how the Dutta family were perceived and conceived by others. So, they have become the 'other' in the due process of recognition and negotiation of the recognition.

Since patterns of 'perceiving' the 'other' are cultural constructs, they can be empirically challenged and analytically deconstructed. Thus, while the cultural reference frame includes stereotyped patterns of 'perceiving' the 'other', the system of culture production also provides the means to critique and limit them. (Dusche 53)

The process of othering renders the newly formed group a tag of minority as the process entails an intrinsic hegemonic process of the powerful group having control of the comparatively weaker ones.

The process of identification of 'national heritage' did not necessarily involve negotiation and consent from all family members. In the past, dominant strands of society claimed ownership of the national heritage. The elite determined which elements of heritage were worthy of affirmation or preservation in the public space at the national level... This can be aligned with the notion of 'cultural capital' as developed by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu pointed to the capacity of the ruling elite to exercise power in the process of selecting and determining dominant ideologies. (Logan, Langfield and Craith 12)

"The differentiation of society into separate groupings becomes social stratification when these groupings can be seen as forming a hierarchy." (Edgar and Sedgwick 318) This stratification entails an associated isolation or alienation imposed on the weaker section and deride them of their nationality with a censoring view of the minority's religion.

Alienation, albeit one that makes full use of the metaphorical association of being a foreigner, outsider or stranger in one's own land, occurs in much philosophical and cultural commentary on the condition of modern society. Alienation may readily be associated with the experience of exile as in some sense paradigmatic of the experience of the twentieth century. Thus existentialism may tempt parallels to be drawn between alienation and such ideas as anxiety and inauthenticity. Similarly, alienation may be associated with Durkheim's concept of anomie, or with Weber's confrontation of the modern individual with the iron cage of bureaucracy... [Anomie], key term in Durkheimian sociology referring to

the loss, on the part of an individual or group, of norms to guide social interaction. The concept serves to illuminate the relationship of individual behaviour and experience to the social structure. Norms mundanely constitute a framework that restricts the aspirations and goals of individual members of a society, so that they are coherent with the means available for their realisation.(Edgar and Sedgwick 10, 12)

The process of alienation creates a precondition to the communal polarity generated and perceived in form of counter-assertion to the imposition of power. As Maurice Duverger conceptualizes his concept of power as:

Power is felt as power by those who obey it and those who obey it and those who wield it. To them. It is not just a physical phenomenon, domination. It is also a psychological phenomenon. Here, we are confronted with the notion of “legitimacy,” which we will often return to because it is a key concept. Power, properly speaking, is always regarded as something “legitimate,” to a greater or lesser degree, meaning that we find it more or less natural to obey it. On the contrary, plain domination appears only to be result of our inability to resist its pressure; we obey because we cannot physically do otherwise. But power is obeyed because we think that we ought to do so, because we believe that it is legitimate to obey. As long as there is cohesiveness, physical stability, and adherence to a structural model, it is this sense of legitimacy that distinguishes power from simply authority relationships. Clearly, the two phenomena are linked to each other. Stability, continuity, and ties to a structural model engender a sense of legitimacy.(Duverger 18)

The power equation exhibited between the Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh is not unidirectional in terms of Muslims asserting themselves owing to their demographically majority status, but also due to Hindus accepting the aggression and the detrimental cry to leave the country, compelled by aggression and fanaticism. They become passive spectators to their exploitation and thereby succumb to the excess of fundamentalism. Their consent to move away from Bangladesh makes them consenting subjects to their own exploitation. Sudhamoy contemplates upon the perceived loss with abrupt displacement and migration.

[Sudhamoy] could not understand what people hoped to gain by going away. If the total number of Hindus in the country decreased any further, they would only be persecuted the more. In fact, it was a no-win situation in which those who remained and those who left both lost. It was a loss for the poor, a loss for the minorities. Sudhamoy wondered exactly how many more Hindus in this country must suffer and die, to pay for the sins of the Hindus in India, both past and present. If he knew, perhaps he could have committed suicide, so that by doing so some measure of peace could accrue to the Hindus. (Nasrin 196)

The Hindus participate in process of victimization by non-assertion of their individual identity. With the historiography of their nationality being put to question, it becomes rather imperative to understand and thereby locate the directed and conscious misrecognition of the

Hindus as the 'others.' Michael Dusche elaborates upon the representation and recognition of the difference within the singularity.

Symbolic representation of identity are never stable. Instead, they are in constant need of negotiation- in the communicative situation itself, and more generally in the larger framework of society. To be successful in these negotiations, the individual has to walk a fine line between yielding to the expectations of the collective, on one hand, and insisting on its distinctiveness, on the other. Failing to assert itself in an acceptable way the individual becomes vulnerable to identify ascriptions by others. By losing control over its symbolic representation, however, it also partly loses control over its life. Others will represent him/her as *they* wish without any consideration for how she/he would like to be represented. Having to live with an identity imposed by others, the liberty of the individual is severely restricted.(Dusche 84-85)

As conceived by Benedict Anderson,

[Nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.(Anderson 6)

But, such imaginings get distorted in the perplexing issue of socio-political modernity which shapes, orients and re-orientates the subjective identities associated therein.

Identity is a socially constructed definition of an individual. As socially constructed, the definition of an individual makes use of culturally available meanings and distributes them according to rules of interaction and patterns of stratification. The meaning of an individual, then, derives from these socially constructed definitions- that is, his or her identities. (Weigert, Teitge and Teitge 34)

The Dutta family's identity gets jeopardised in the manner in which it is perceived by the majority and how Sudhamoy Dutta finds it difficult to reconfigure his identity based on the strategy of survival. Their sense of belongingness to Bangladesh fades and their identity as a Bangladeshi is masked by the communal identity as a Hindu, and therefore align the allegiance towards a Hindu-majority space appropriated as India.

I am not leaving the property of my forefathers. Coconut and betel nut plantations, yards and yards of rich paddy fields, a house that stands on over two bighas land.... I cannot leave all this to become a refugee on the platform of Sealdah station... 'Why should I leave my homeland and go somewhere else? If I live it will be on this soil, and if I die it will be in this very same place.'(Nasrin, 1994, p. 7)

Sudhamoy speculates upon the aspect of displacement which will amount to eventual epistemological uprooting from his origins to be lost in territory with no base but superfluous and relativistic attachments. The sense of 'loss' is further pronounced as he already feels at loss in Dhaka away from Mymensingh.

Re-constituting the human invites some anxious attention to forms of normative and lived struggles to what Hannah Arendt named in a difficult and poignant phrase ‘the rights to have rights.’ Writing in the wake of Holocaust, Arendt [in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*]enunciated this right as against the loss of belonging to a ‘polity’, where the stateless person or entire communities suffer not merely ‘a loss of home but the impossibility of finding a new one’, constituting thus an expulsion from ‘humanity’ itself. This expulsion is a marker not usually thought of as denial of any rule of law regime but of the fact that ‘no law exists for them’ (Baxi 27)

His son, Suranjan, did deride the idea of radical Islamic fundamentalism but as the communal blaze intensified, it seemed rather difficult to withstand the pressure. He explained that the violence were characteristically different in emboldening the discernment of selective appropriation of religion as the sole parameter of nationality and the Islamic identity painted the multi-cultural and syncretic canvas with the tone of polarized singularity. . “[W]ith “identity disregard,” there is a different kind of reductionism, which we may call “singular affiliation,” which takes the form of assuming that any person preeminently belongs, for all practical purposes, to one collectivity only- no more and no less.” (Sen 20)

And did the word riot mean one community’s ruthless victimization of another? No, such a phenomenon could not be dismissed as rioting. What actually happened was that one community had invaded the sanctity and privacy of another community in a cold-blooded, remorseless way. This was nothing short of tyranny and oppression. (Nasrin, 1994, p. 6)

Sudhamoy questions Suranjan, “Riots break out in all countries. Aren’t there riots in India? Aren’t people dying there? Have you kept track of the number of people who’ve died?” To which Suranjan retorts, “If it were riots I’d understand, Baba. These aren’t riots. It is simply a case of Muslims killing Hindus.” (Nasrin, 1994, p. 213) The secular fabric is stifled and asphyxiated with the majority taking an exasperated and predisposed stand to impose terms on defining the ‘minority.’

The fact that secularization is a dynamic process and therefore new minorities may emerge without much warning. This process, by which minorities are created, unbeknownst to them, is what has been termed here as *minoritization*. When minoritization takes place the communities that are picked on for persecution are decided upon by the majority or those ‘others’ who are on the outside. (Gupta 52-53)

With the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Muslim community in Bangladesh identified the Hindus in the nation in the similar light as being the perpetrators of violence. A sense of euphoria driven nationalism seemed to have engaged them to turn blind eye on humanity and trample it upon the pervading animosity dividend towards the Hindus as the enemy and Hinduism as an institution to be looked upon with scorn.

[N]ationalism [is considered] as a psycho-historical phenomenon, as a collective reaction to social and psychological crises produced by periods of transition from a traditional, agrarian to industrial, urban social structure, and by periods of cultural retardation and prolonged political and cultural

oppression. The reaction to such crises leads to a highly emotional social solidarity and a highly idealized image of the group.(Babru 196)

The nationalistic fervour gets underwired with the symbolic shattering of their idolatry of faith in form of destruction of the Babri Masjid. The Babri Masjid element merges the communal element in the already rousing nationalistic stimulation.

Communalism is considered a modern phenomenon in the sense that although sectarian and inter-religious tensions and conflicts did take place in ancient and medieval periods of Indian history, their recurrence during the colonial period was frequent and at times deliberate. The colonial State often manipulate ethnic, religious/sectarian sentiments to its own advantage. "Divide and Rule" was in fact the key strategy of the colonial State.(Jain 59)

Such disruptions in the society getting legitimized in name of nationalism is critiqued by Nairn on his speculative take on nationalism and its excess.

"Nationalism" is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as "neurosis" in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world (the equivalent of infantilism for societies)and largely incurable.(Nairn 347)

The violence in the name of religion and nationalism, uproots the citizens from their origin and the majority in the context defines the subjective apportionment of identity debasing the minority to be subliminal tenant in the larger divisional equation.

They do not seem to realize that Hindus have not drifted into Bangladesh with the flood waters. We are as much citizens of this country as anyone else. We have the right to live, as also the right to protect our own lives, property and places of worship.' (Nasrin, 1994, p. 109)

The Hindus assert their rights on the land but Nasrin makes the situation grim by showing their helplessness in the situation and futility in their attempt to resuscitate.

'Riots are not like floods that you can simply be rescued and given some muri to survive on temporarily. Nor are they like fires that can be quenched to bring about relief. When a riot is in progress, human beings keep their humanity in check. The worst and the most poisonous aspect of man surfaces during a riot. Riots are not natural calamities, nor disasters, so to speak. They are simply perversion of humanity....' (Nasrin, 1994, p. 165)

Nasrin gives a deeply touching insight of humanity being put to scrutiny of time and space with perceived shifting nationalities and how people are uprooted, detached and displaced from their places of origin there sapping the sense of identity from them.

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