
Intersection of Religion and Politics in the Persecution of Minorities in Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*

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Abstract

Taslims Nasrin's controversial novel, Lajja (Shame) which has attracted world-wide attention, is a dramatic depiction of the communal character of politics and religion which brought a blot on beautiful cultural heritage and caused human tragedy in Bangladesh. Nasrin's purpose of writing this novel was not to favour or to criticise any religion but to appeal to every majority community to respect the people of minority community and reminds the government of that country to discharge its duty without showing favouritism towards any one of its citizen. She appeals, "Let another name of religion be humanism". Nasrin's Lajja reiterates that what happened over years in Bangladesh was like strangulation and destruction of a beautiful culture and civilization in the name of religion in association with politics. The present paper reveals how religion and politics work together in the persecution of Hindu minority by Muslim majority in a country which was founded on the principles of secularism and socialism.

Key words: politics, religion, persecution, communal, minority.

Introduction:

Religion and politics, though conceptually distinct entities, do indeed intersect in all manner of ways. In practice, religion cannot keep itself aloof from politics. The intermingling of religion and politics is permissible as long it facilitates meet the objectives of securing a dignified life for all, preventing discrimination on the basis of religion, checking religious bigotry, and managing frenzied inter religious and inter-communal conflicts that threaten to plunge societies into barbarism. But if the intersection of religion and politics fails in fulfilling these aims, then their amalgamation must be restricted. Religious groups participate in a wide variety of political activities which sometimes causes the breaching of peace and harmony in the society. The same is true with Bangladesh and the evidence of which is truthfully mirrored in Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*. Taslima Nasrin's controversial novel, *Lajja (Shame)*, highlights the communal character of the government of Bangladesh and its people in the outrage of humanity. The book deals with various

historical events since 1947 and reveals the cruel aspect of intersection of religion and politics in the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh, by the Muslims, who were in the majority.

Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* is the outcome of the disturbed period in Bangladesh when on 6, December 1992 the disputed and dilapidated structure of Babri Masjid was demolished by a mob of Hindu Kar Sewaks in Ayodhya in India. *Lajja* is not only an invaluable historical document but also a text the relevance of which has not been diminished in the two decades it was published. The book is claimed to be written over a period of seven days amidst the massive and barbaric act of persecution of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh. In the 'Preface' to her novel, *Lajja*, Nasrin states the purpose of writing this book:

I detest fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason I wrote *Lajja* soon 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 hunted 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. The riots that took place in 1992 in Bangladesh are the responsibility of us all, and we are all to be blamed. *Lajja* is a document of our collective defeat. (1994: ix)

Taslima Nasrin's 15th novel, originally *Lojja (Shame)* has attracted worldwide attention and has been translated from Bengali into English by Tutul Gupta and several other Indian and world languages. Through the story of a Bengali Hindu family, Nasrin has revealed the sordid aspect of intersection of politics and religion in the persecution of Hindus in her motherland, Bangladesh. The novel opens with a description of the miserable condition of a Bengali Hindu family comprising four members – Sudhamoy Dutta who is a doctor, his patient and strong-willed wife Kironmoyee, his educated but unemployed son, Suranjan, and a bright diligent daughter, Nilanjana, lovingly called Maya. The narrative paced along with the numerous newspaper reports and events which took place between 1947 and 1992. *Lajja* depicts the story of insatiable greed of property, money, and women which is woven round the predicament of a minority Hindu family in Bangladesh, in the wake of demolition of Babri Masjid in India.

The Dutta family was very proud of their motherland – the only motherland they knew was their Sonar Bangla immortalized by Rabindra Nath Tagore in his poems. After the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 in India, many of Dutta's relatives and neighbours had left Bangladesh as they could not put up with the deteriorating human and ethical values in the country. Sudhamoy Dutta, whose ancestral home was in Mymensingh, was forced to part with his land and property and give them to a Muslim neighbour for a paltry sum and seek shelter in a small flat in Dhaka. He was a doctor in Government service but being a Hindu he was denied promotion. On many occasions including partition of India from Pakistan in 1947, Freedom Movement of 1971 in Bangladesh, demolition of Babri Masjid in India at the end of 1992, Sudhamoy Dutta was tortured and humiliated inhumanely yet he refused to leave his motherland like his father Sukumar Dutta who believed in the words of Jinnah, the Governor General of Pakistan:

"Let's forget about our historical connection to India; in Bangladesh we must remain faithful to the secular ideals we have fought for. From this day onwards, Hindus, Muslims,

Christians and Buddhists will not be identified by their respective religion, but by their identity as Pakistanis". (87)

Sudhamoy who believed in his father's rationale says, "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 the very same place." He stayed in Bangladesh determined to serve his country as a physician. The similar patriotism is revealed in Sudhamoy Dutta's idealistic son, Suranjan who after the black deeds of the mobs who have destroyed countless temples, raped thousands of women and killed a large number of Hindus in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, declares:

Why should he flee his home simply because his name was Suranjan Dutta? Was it necessary for his family -- Sudhamoy, his father, Kironmoyee, his mother and Nilanjana, his sister -- to run away like fugitives just because of their names? (1)

Like his patriotic father, Suranjan too refused to accept the religion-based foundation of a nation-state. Despite such patriotism the Hindus were persecuted robbed of their property, numbers of temples were demolished; Hindu women were abducted and even raped before their family. Citing a variety of unlawful and inhuman incidents, in her novel, *Lajja*, Nasrin has given ample evidence about the communal and sadistic approach of the government administration and the justice system towards Hindus.

After the publication of the novel in 1993, *Lajja* was proscribed by the government and a *fatwa* was issued with a reward of Rs 50,000 against Taslima Nasrin by an unknown fundamentalist group in Bangladesh in the same year. According to the Islamic text, *fatwa* stands for a decree or a formal legal judgment based on the Quran and hadith (Netton 1992, 82). Nasrin went into hiding and was ultimately forced to accept political asylum in Norway in order to survive the *fatwa* issued against her in own motherland. They also filed a case against Nasrin in the court for anti-Islam writing. Taking the advantage of such situation in Bangladesh, the BJP, the political party of Hindu fundamentalists in India illegally reprinted *Lajja* to distribute it openly just to add fuel to the fire to the religious communalism both in India and in Bangladesh. Nasrin had to face all sorts of suppression, and denial of liberty and human rights. Nasrin's crime was that she, being a Muslim, dared to expose the oppression of a minority in Islamic society.

It is the irony of the people, especially of the Hindus of Bangladesh that the country which was founded on the basis of the principles of the Freedom Movement of 1971 viz; nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism and in which all the people of the country, irrespective of religion, fought shoulder to shoulder for their liberation from the oppressive tyranny of Pakistan rulers, became the victim of religious fanaticism. Almost all the political parties in Bangladesh support an agenda of Islamicization. Even Mujibur Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh who owed his life and power to India passed the law to declare the property of Hindu migrants to India as enemy property. Zia Ur Rahman who seized power after the assassination of Mujib Ur Rahman, introduced in the beginning of the Constitution the Arabic words – "*Bismilllah ir Rehman ir Rahim*" (In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful). The articles declaring Bangladesh as a secular state were deleted. The citizens who were earlier called "Bengalis" were now called "Bangladeshis". General Ershad who succeeded Zia Ur Rehman went a step further by declaring Islam as the State religion. Gradually, the secular forces weakened and Communists became communalists. The Hindus were discriminated against and victimized in every walk of life – in army, services, business, academic institutions. The condition of Hindus

became worse than second class citizens with no citizenship rights except to vote the Muslims in order to make them their masters who in return did not provide them any facility to have a peaceful life and equality in the society.

The biased amendment in the constitution provided the hidden authority to the fanatic Muslims to catch the Hindus and kill them or convert them to Islam: "Let us catch a Hindu or two, eat them in the morning and evening too..."(17). At every level, they were harassed and haunted. The whole system of administration blindly favoured the Muslims and Islamic communalism. It was almost impossible for the Hindus to get jobs or admissions in educational institutions. If they were appointed, they were harassed at all levels and then their due promotions were also denied to them. Nasrin narrates the anguish of a Hindu minority:

In Dhaka, Sudhamoy had applied for a senior government job, one that would be a promotion on the official position he had in Mymensingh... But he had discovered that officers junior to him had got their promotion. In his very presence, Sudhamoy had seen his file being slipped under those of Dr. Karimuddin and Dr. Yaqub Molla... He had finally retired as an Assistant Professor... Sudhamoy realized that he was not made Associate Professor simply because he was a Hindu called Sudhamoy Dutta. Had he been Muhammad Ali or Salimullah Chowdhury there would hardly have been any obstacles in his way. (20-22)

Like his father, Suranjan, who is a brilliant person having Master's Degree in Physics, becomes the victim of such discrimination on many occasions. Though he had been one of the sharpest students in the university yet the students whom he helped in their studies, got more marks than him in the final examination. Then, when after completing his college education and when he was in search of a job, he had to face similar discrimination. The Muslim candidates, who had scored less than him, got good job as teachers but he was not selected even for clerk. He did his best in the interviews yet he was not selected. He was surprised enough to find that those candidates who had clicked their tongues in disappointment at not having fared well, would be the first to get appointment letters. The pain of discrimination is clear in Suranjan's outbursts:

It was a fact that those who said Assalaam Aleikum incessantly and made a great show of respect towards their examiners were the first to abuse them the moment they were out of hearing. Yet, it was these boys who were thought to be well mannered and it was those who passed the interviews... It was because he was a Hindu, but there were no jobs forthcoming with the government. (52-53)

Kironmoyee, the loyal wife of Sudhamoy, was a good singer but she had to stop giving public performances since Muslim fanatics considered singing in public by women as a shameless behaviour! Understanding the helpless situation for Hindus, she stopped using sindur, loha and sankha on her wrist. When Suranjan was plotted to eat beef by his Muslim friend, Faroukh, Kironmoyee had to cook the beef on the plea of her liberal husband Sudhamoy, who had explained to his wife, at great length the futility and illogicality of observing such customs and even encourages the members of his family to eat beef. Despite all these, no one in the Dutta family could even think of leaving their motherland except daughter Maya who feebly suggested it from time to time. But her poignant cry "let us live, let us get away" fall on deaf ears. Suranjan would say: "I won't leave my home whatever the circumstances". (2).

Through the story of Dutta family in *Lajja* Nasrin reveals that minority in Bangladesh

suffered not only deprivation but also oppression and subjugation. Hindu students were forced to attend the Islamic classes and to chant prayers of Islam. Suranjan remembered something that had happened many years ago when Maya was a little student, some girls of her class teased her: "Hindu, Hindu Hindus eats cow's head ... I don't want to be a Hindu anymore. They tease me for being one." (122) One day Maya was teaching the students, among them a girl named Minati was muttering "*Alhamdo Lillahe Rabbil Aalemin...Ar Rahmanir Rahim...*" (98). Maya was very much surprised and shocked to learn that it was the prayer in the most famous school of the capital named Bhikarunessa School and that the students of all the religions had to recite the *Kalma* after the national anthem. Even the young children were filled with the hatred for Hindus; they strictly refused to play with Hindus' children. Suranjan was shocked to find the reason of Poluk's six years old son crying and lying on the floor. On asking the reason Pulok told him:

...the children next door, who used to play with Alok every day, have refused to play with him today. It seemed the Hujur asked them not to mix with Hindu children.'

'Who is this Hujur?'

'Hujur is the Maulvi who comes to their house to teach the children Arabic.'(71)

The honour of Hindus was not safe and abduction and brutal rape of Hindu girls was a common thing in Bangladesh. In such circumstances, most of the Hindus sent their daughters to India for their education and security. Nasrin has mentioned the inhuman torture on women in the text:

Manju Rani Seal, a student in the ninth standard.....was abducted at 8 p.m., on the evening of 4 December 1988 by Abdur Rahim and his goons....there is still no trace of Manju Rani.....In Parkumira village of Tala sub district in Satkhira, Rabindranath Ghosh's young daughter, Chhanda, a third standard student was raped by her schoolteacher...In the middle of the night, her schoolteacher abducted her with the help of some young hooligans. They took the terrified little girl to garden nearby and raped her....a case was filed but no one was arrested. (48-49)

In *Lajja*, Nasrin also narrates the heart-rending incidents which took place at different stage of Maya's life. While coming home from the school, Maya was abducted, when she was only six years old. Nobody knew who the abductors were and what they did with her. She returned home herself two days later. For two months she behaved strangely and slept fitfully and would wake up abruptly in the middle of the night. They used to receive anonymous letters that threatened to kidnap Maya again when she grew a young girl of 19 years. But the incident which took place on the ominous day of 11th December 1992, following the demolition of the Babri Masjid, shattered all the patience of the Dutta family. And that fateful day was when a group of seven hooligans, all about twenty-one years old, entered the house of Sudhamoy who had recently suffered paralysis, and began to destroy the earthly possessions of the Duttas. One of them said, "You bastards! Did you think you could get away after destroying the Babri Masjid?" (147) They took away Maya before helpless Sudhamoy and Kiranmoye screaming and weeping for help but nobody came forward to help her because she was a Hindu girl and the abductors were Muslims. Maya only screamed to her mother for help "Ma ...please help me, Ma ..."(148). Maya's brother Suranjan searched for her in many places along with his Muslim friends to get his sister back but in vain. It seemed that Maya, after being gang-raped, was killed, and thrown into a river.

All these happenings made Suranjan wild in anger and excessively revengeful. On 16th December, the Victory day of Bangladesh, Suranjan brought his home a whore named Shamima Begum, the daughter of Abdul Jalil, and violently raped her. He felt relieved that he had raped a Muslim girl, no matter, she was a prostitute. But, later on he realized his mistake and cursed himself. Being the Marxist, he knew that it was not the solution of his problems and the problems of millions Hindus in Bangladesh. Frustrated Suranjan begs his father to leave their motherland and go to India. Sudhamoy, who was determined not to leave his motherland, but the abduction of Maya shattered all the hopes and dreams of Sudhamoy's family and at last they decided to leave for India. Nasrin describes the change in Sudhamoy who in great pain and sadness says to his son: "Come, let us go away." Surprised, Suranjan asked, "Where will we go, Baba?" and Sudhamoy answered, "India."

And his voice cracked as the shame swept over him. But he had said it, he had forced it out, he had compelled himself to say that they would go; and he had realized that that was the way it would have to be because the strong mountain that he had built within himself was crumbling day by day. (216)

The intersection of religion and politics has not kept religion apart from government. No religion teaches hatred and intolerance as the teachings of all religion is to tell people how to lead a good life. Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* is a book which led to the author's exile from Bangladesh and a *fatwa* in her name because of allegedly blasphemous content, is, in fact, a fictionalized narrative of actual incidents of how Muslim fanatics in Bangladesh retaliated and destroyed a number of temples, killed innocent Hindus and brutally raped Hindu girls who had nothing to do with the demolition of Babri Masjid in India. Taslima Nasrin and her *Lajja* are highly relevant in 21st century. The threat of religious fanaticism has increased many times since the time she wrote *Lajja*. Earlier it was only Hindus who were the target of the hatred, but now it is the entire world that is becoming the target of crooked politicians and fanatics. Religious fascism would not be a big threat if it were restricted to political outfits. Taslima Nasrin's purpose of writing this book does not seem to criticize any religion but to warn against the intersection of politics and religion in the persecution of humanity at large.

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