Images of Communities: Reflections of a Writer

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Ashraf was my neighbour in pre-Partition days. A very bigoted fellow, but a helpful neighbour. When the riots broke out in my town, he was the first to reassure our family that nothing untoward would be allowed to happen to us. And he lived up to his word. He must have counselled his equally bigoted friends – and we lived in a predominantly Muslim area – not to bother us in any way.

I was a Congress activist in those days, and one day, in the company of Hakim Abdul Ghani, another Congress worker, as I was going towards the District Congress Office, I met Ashraf on the road. I introduced Abdul Ghani to him, but Ashraf refused to shake hands with him; instead, in a voice quivering with anger he shouted: "I don't shake hands with the dogs of the Hindus." We were both embarrassed and nonplussed, and before Ashraf could add more to his vituperations, we left him and went our way.

After the riots, some days later, I learnt that while Ashraf had earnestly attended to our security, he had also been instrumental in the killing of many Hindus in another locality.

I remember Iltaf Hussain also, a class-fellow of mine and a dear friend. He died last year at Rawalpindi, the town to which I too belonged. Ours was a very warm friendship in pre-Partition days. He was the only Muslim friend who could and did come inside our house, come up to my room, and sit with me for any length of time – something which was very unusual in our Arya Samajist family. Our friendship had cooled considerably during the pre-Partition days – he had got close to the Muslim League while I had joined the Congress. But even in those days of tension, we had not become hostile to each other. Once when I was going in a bus along with Congress workers, raising peace-slogans, I saw him standing by the roadside. When our eyes met he smiled sardonically and shook his head.

But after the Partition, we began to correspond with each other. He wrote very warm letters. He invited me to his son's wedding, but the notice being very short, I could not make it. In one of his letters he wrote – when his health had begun to deteriorate – that he had only two strong desires to fulfil before he died – one, to meet his old friend, i.e. myself, and the other, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. He was not destined to fulfil either of the desires, for he died soon after. My only consolation is that my daughter, Kalpana, was able to go to Pakistan and our home-town, Rawalpindi, and meet Iltaf Hussain and personally convey to him my love and regards.

I have some other friends too in Pakistan, some with whom I have

common literary interests or with whom I share common views. But here was Iltaf with whom I had strong political differences, and yet there was something in our relationship which went far above these political differences, a fact which convinces me that political differences can be ephemeral, whereas human relations can be abiding, deep and heart-warming, and know no caste or religion. I have seen quite a few such abiding friendships in other people's lives also.

Whenever I reminisce about those far-off days, many a face flits across my mind. I see myself, walking along a long, metalled road in Jalandhar Cantonment after the riots, and by my side is Bahadur Singh, a Sikh neighbour of my Rawalpindi days. He walked along with me, but he was in a kind of daze. He told me that he had killed 86 Muslims during the days of the riots. He bragged about it, but it appeared to me that he was already sick at heart, and had not been able to get over the sense of acute depression and frustration that his cold-blooded butchery had engendered. . . . He walks in the streets of Delhi now, half-blind, living a bedraggled existence, knocking at the doors of old Rawalpindi friends and acquaintances and asking for monetary help.

There is a lot of incitement in the air. For some time people can be so swayed as to believe in communal slogans. And today, every effort is being made to rouse communal passions. It is not difficult to do so, either. You can pick up any number of instances from history – of temples demolished by Muslim rulers, of discrimination practised against Hindus, of the bigotry of Aurangzeb and others – to rouse communal passions. But history also provides resplendent instances of hundreds of saint poets, darveshes, and others who talked of one God and one humanity, whose words moved millions of hearts, and who laid the strong foundations of a peaceful, pluralistic society, who gave us a common outlook on life, who gave us our present-day languages, and whose seats and *chabutras* have continued to remain as places of pilgrimage for both Hindus and Muslims. That also is an aspect of history which we can ill afford to ignore. Perhaps this provides a much more reliable basis of relationship in the kind of multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society like ours.

Another image of communities that appears, time and again, before my mind's eye and is very disturbing is of large groups of men and women, leaving their hearths and homes and trekking across large areas, in search of shelter, sometimes leaving behind their devastated, burning villages and homes, often terror-stricken and confused. Such trekking groups of refugees were seen after the riots in Bhagalpur, as also after the dreadful happenings in Kashmir, when Pandits left their homes; their number has swelled to three hundred thousand. It is one thing to become a refugee when your country is divided and you are compelled to leave one part and settle in another; it is quite another when you become a refugee within your own country and have to move from pillar to post for shelter.

Such scenes of exodus do not relate only to religious communities; there

are communities of poor labourers, particularly Biharis, who go in thousands to different parts of the country to seek work in big towns, on construction sites, etc. because hunger stalks the land, and the only glimmer of hope is from the metropolitan towns and construction sites. They are worse off than the religious communities, for while a helping hand may be stretched to the victims of communal frenzy, little help is extended to these homeless labourers except for what they earn with their own labour. Such groups, trekking across the land, do not include Biharis alone; there are men and women from other parts too, and their plight too is as pitiable as that of Biharis.

It needs someone's powerful pen to portray this aspect of life in our country today.

I had occasion to deal with religious communities in my novel *Tamas* (1973). Since then the situation vis-a-vis religious communities has further deteriorated. Attitudes have hardened, terrorism with lethal weapons has appeared on the scene, thanks to explosives, guns, grenades, the close association of the Mafia, the hostile attitude of the rulers of Pakistan, etc. The only saving grace is that the common people are not swayed by the inflammatory communal propaganda, their hearts are sound, and their minds are still clear about the kind of India they would like to live in.

There is another kind of community – the caste community (largely among the Hindus). Happily, the stranglehold of its dos and don'ts is now growing weaker, at least in big towns.

In a novel written long after *Tamas,* in 1985, called *Mayyadas ki Madi,* I have tried to portray the interrelationships among these caste-communities and the vicissitudes through which these inter-relationships pass. Sometimes within the caste-community, cleavages occur. In olden days, these used to be hard to bridge.

The locale of the novel is a small town in West Panjab, the time, the first half of the last century. A dispute arises, at the time of marriage, between the bridegroom's party and the bride's, over a very flimsy issue. When the wedding guests have sat down to dinner, the bridegroom, a bit of a nit-wit, complains of having been ignored by those of the bride's party. The guests get up in a huff. The marriage however is solemnised. But the girl's people react sharply to the misbehaviour of the bridegroom's party, and among themselves quietly decide that henceforth, they would not marry their girls into any family of that sub-caste. The bridegroom's party comes to know of this decision, and decides to teach a lesson to the bride's party. They send back the newly wedded bride to her home even before she has stepped out of her *palki* with the message to her people that unless and until another girl from their sub-caste is married off to one of their boys, the earlier marriage should be considered as annulled.

A crisis develops, a second girl from the same sub-caste is eventually offered. A lot of trickery is played; this time the bridegroom is an ailing fellow, suffering from epileptic fits, who is married off to a young, innocent

girl, the daughter of a poor widow, who does not even know what is happening to her.

Thus the story moves.

Mercifully enough, in big towns the caste-*biradaries* are becoming less self-assertive among the middle classes, partly because of the breaking up of the joint family system. But the old hang-over still remains. And in villages and small towns, the caste-*biradaries* still exercise considerable influence and use their clout.

Of late many communities such as the Adivasis, the tribals, the dalits, etc. are emerging on our social horizon, challenging the age-old subservience to which they had been subjected. And their plight and also their struggle for a more just dispensation have inspired many a writer to depict their life and problems in literature, which to my mind is very welcome and will greatly promote that awareness which is so necessary for the growth and development of a truly democratic, pluralistic society.

I once had occasion to live in Benares for a couple of months. That was long ago. Benares is at once the most fascinating and the weirdest town in India. Boats going down the river along the ghats, hundreds of stairs on each ghat, leading upto temples and old mansions as also into narrow crooked lanes, the gorgeous sunset, the air all the time resonant with the sound of temple-bells and'kirtans' and the streets thronged by pilgrims propitiating gods and goddesses and as much frightened of life as of death – this is one aspect of the life of Benares.

The other is of caste-communities. You see any number of them; the whole town is infested with them. And a lot else. There are the widows – their heads shaven, covered in white *dhotis,* pale young widows and old widows, going in long rows from one temple to another, carrying the holy water of the Ganges in brass *lotas.* The very sight of them makes you feel uneasy inside. Then there are Sadhus and Sadhus and Sadhus, each belonging to his own *akhara* and there are hundreds of such *akharas,* more apparent during the times of the *kumbha* or some other auspicious occasion, each *akhara* more ferocious than the other in its capacity for animosity and virulence. Then there is the 'notorious tribe' of the *pandas* with the age-old profession of performing rites and rituals for the pilgrims and fleecing them as they alone can. You have to experience a thing or two before you can conclude what a weird town Benares is. There are quite a few other caste-communities too, which I have not mentioned.

Well, it was on one of these ghats of Benares that I saw a sight which in its grotesque irony surpassed all others which I had seen in that town.

On the steps of the ghat sat lepers, one below the other. There were five such parallel rows on the ghat. They sat with their *kamandals* by their side, ready to receive alms. It was a grim sight, hundreds of lepers, with swollen, rotting limbs and deformed faces. Luckily for them, they were sitting on a

ghat close to a temple and it was some auspicious day, so that the devotees and pilgrims in fairly large numbers were about, putting *marundas,* balls of wheat and sugar, and such other things in their *kamandals.*

Suddenly there was a furore. Many of the lepers had begun shouting, a few of them even got up, supporting themselves on their sticks, and yelling at the top of their voices.

What had happened was that another leper had come from somewhere and was trying to sit on one of the steps, to beg like others. But the others would not let him sit among them, because, even though a leper, he was from a lower caste, whereas those who occupied the steps were all Brahmins. The fellow did not have a *kamandal* either, he was carrying only a tin-can.

The fellow was, of course, hounded out in no time.

Later on, I tried to bring out the irony of the situation in a short story entitled "Esh Dharmah Sananata."

Woe to the man who is poor and also belongs to a lower caste. Even starving, God-forsaken lepers can inflict pain on a fellow leper by reason of their superior caste. It was a nightmarish sight!

You are in for double suffering if you are poor and also belong to a lower caste. I read in a newspaper once about some landless labourers in a Bihar village, all belonging to the same lower caste, who had the temerity to organise themselves into a body to demand higher wages from their Thakur landlord. Ten of them were shot down at one go, without an eyelid batting!

Where do we go from here? Should people organise themselves on the basis of caste and community and fight collectively for their rightful demands? Or, should they ignore the caste and community, and fight on the basis of the deprived against the priyileged, for there are both rich and poor among castes and communities. I believe the second course is still the right one, for it cuts across caste and community loyalties, and thereby weakens their stranglehold, and in consequence strengthens, in its own way, the pluralistic character of our polity. We certainly have a very long way to go.

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The academic programmes of the IUC are financed by the University Grants Commission. The IIAS takes care of the residential requirements of the Associates besides providing library and some secretarial and documentation facilities. The IUC awards Associateship through open advertisement. The teachers selected as Associates come to the IUC for a period ranging from one to three months in a span of three years. They continue to draw salaries from their own institutions, and the IUC defrays their travel expenses and pays a maintenance allowance of Rs. 100 per day.

The Centre provides accommodation and medical facilities to the Associates. Besides pursuing their own research the Associates are required to participate in the ongoing academic programmes of the Institute.

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