

REVERED BLITHE AND JOYFUL RECOLLECTION OF COMMUNAL HARMONY IN TASLIMA NASRIN'S *LAJJA*

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Abstract

It is said that peace and harmony are the basic principles of all religions. Still in the name of religion there has been so much uproar, oppression and bloodshed. It is undeniably a matter of shame that even in the twentieth century we have to witness such carnages on the name of religion. Through 'Lajja', Taslima Nasrin 'detests fundamentalism and communalism.' She outrageously presents the naked picture of different regions and pitiable conditions of Hindus living in Bangladesh after the demolition of Babari Masjid in India on 6th December 1992. It is a shame for all the people living in the country where minorities have to compromise for their basic rights like health, education, job and following rituals. 'Lajja is the document of collective defeat.' It is a question on world fraternity when people of some regions have to face racial discrimination and life threats. All the holy scriptures preach to be grateful to have human life and enjoy the bliss of humanity. The notion of being superior creed, having particular colour of the skin, jealousy and lack of tolerance towards others and futile desire to become the God man and correct the world through torment, have given humans nothing but pain, bloodsheds and death. Accepting people as they are and respecting them will help harmony, congruence and congeniality prevail in the world. It is the collective responsibility of all to generate and maintain harmony through their actions towards the fellow brothers.

Introduction

The world is advancing with a high speed to minimise the human efforts and make life more comfortable, to make this world a peaceful place where humans experience euphoria and life is nothing but a delightful journey. Science and technologies are bridging the physical, geographical, social and economic gap. Somehow, the repercussion is contradictory. The world

communities are narrowing down their perception towards other communities, cultural intolerance has increased and day by day this rift is widening. It is ironical that rather than learning a lesson from history and developing openness to all and showing acceptance and fraternity, we still cling on trivial conceptions of caste, religion, language, regionalism and many more. It is truly conflicting notion that a world is developing at rocket speed and on the other side there are fundamentalists who do not wish to forget the past, forgive the wanderer and let the world celebrate the blithe of human life.

What is communal harmony? The word harmony reflects congenial relations and mutual respect to others, irrespective of the difference. Harmony is possible where different musical notes gather; even mono tone of musical instrument won't be harmonious. Harmony is requisite for pleasant music as well, and harmony is obvious only when there is diverse components merge together. The moment harmony is prefixed with the word 'communal', little tint of discrimination is added. With communal affixation, harmony becomes dependable on others' acceptance, perception, openness and tolerance.

Hope for Communal Harmony

'*Lajja-Shame*' – the most controversial novel by Taslima Nasrin is a bold attempt to redefine religion and humanism in the most dreadful manner. The spectre of communalism haunts the Duttas -Sudhamoy and Kironmoyee – the couple and their son, Suranjan and daughter, Maya (Nilanjana). A well settled family in rural area of south Bangladesh upholds strong human values and patriotism. The tremendous faith in law and order of the country, spirit of brotherhood and everlasting hope for living in the beautiful motherland was inherited from the grandfather, Sukumar Dutta, who was determined not to betray the values. He would say, '*if there is no security in your own country, where in the world can we go looking for it?*' (6.2) Sudhamoy sustained the same fervour and passed the legacy to his son, Suranjan. Suranjan in his opinion strongly believed himself '*the most secular*' and he believed his country the same for which he pays heavily.

Lajja, written in seven days and spanning over a period of thirteen days, is the collection of newspaper excerpts and mirror of anti-Hindu riots that broke out in Bangladesh in retaliation to the demolition of Babri Masjid in India. 'Suranjan had never been to Ayodhya, nor had he seen Babri Masjid'. In fact he has never gone out of Bangladesh. Still demolition of this sixteen century monument was disastrous not only for Indian Muslims but all Hindus as well. '*It was an attack on international harmony and collective conscience of the people*' (3.1) Any political party should realize that India cannot be separated from the other parts of the world. '*..if peace and harmony is on stake, its effect will be seen on neighbouring countries as well*'. (3.2)

The Indian sub-continent cultures have emerged as multicultural through lot of cultural diversity that has amalgamated in last thousand years. The way different cultures have integrated and evolved, it is difficult to sieve out the originality of a particular culture. For centuries, harmony has prevailed in most of the social and political affairs of the continent. The multi culture of this region has contributed in the development of almost all the spheres of life. What we see present demographic variation is the evidence of personal freedom and self-contentment that people have always enjoyed. People have enjoyed the freedom to follow the religion, to speak the language of their choice. As the political power of the countries changes, undoubtedly it gets transferred to the ruling government, the mammoth responsibility to accept, appreciate and preserve this cultural and religious diversity. Any failure of government to protect the cultural diversity of the country may disaster to not only the home country but neighbouring

countries also. Inability of government to curb the religious fundamentalism in any of the Indian sub-continent countries may bring catastrophe to the common people living in these regions. It is the prime responsibility of the government to protect the human values and not the religious.

'Lajja' is 'a vocal protest against fundamentalism'. Taslima Nasrin has beautifully adopted a device of 'flashback narrative'. The joyful recollection of communal harmony is the cherished but unfulfilled dream of the characters of the novel. A constant desire for communal harmony is made obvious by depriving characters of it. As readers, we have permeating feelings of missing something in present and that keeps hope for peace and harmony alive. The novel has constant undertone of nostalgic and joyful memories of pleasant past. An optimistic feel for restoring a peaceful environment in the country and re-establishing communal harmony as before is what readers look for.

Sudhamoy is the representative Hindu of the country and a proud man for playing active role in the independence of the country. He, unlike other Hindus, does not want to leave '*coconut and betel nuts plantation, yards and yards of rich paddy fields, a house that stands on over two bighas of land...*' (6.3) Why should he leave his home country, the land and the home to which his happy memories of playful childhood are attached. Why there is no one to protect his memories and promise him a joyful and prosperous life. Why should he leave this country for just being Hindu. The novel describes numerous incidents where Hindus are deprived of their basic rights like education, job and health just because the country is non-secular. The 'privacy and sanctity of another community is invaded in cold blooded and remorseless way'. Sudhamoy, who once enjoyed the pleasant company of his Hindu friends, recalls how they keep distance now in the face of his anger and scorn. He recalls, how on the name of rituals his friends isolated him and he being liberal human had remained alone. His friends would keep distance on the excuse of prayer time and celebration of their festival. This has bestowed upon him the pain of social outcaste and forced reclusion. He had become strange in his own hometown. He also recalls how he missed promotional opportunities in the job in spite of him being eligible for it. His absolute patriotism will outburst when his Hindu friends are migrating to India. He would say, '*when there was a war in the country you run away like cowards. After independence you come back to assert your heroism and now at the slightest provocation you plan to go back to India*' (19.1)

The agony of Kironmoyee was deep rooted. She became silent after leaving their ancestral home which was sold in lower cost than market price. Even the law did not favour them. She was a wife, and mother of two – a son and a daughter. She felt extremely insecure about her daughter. She tried to send her to Kolkata to her sister's place for ten days, but as family holds faith in political restoration, she comes back saying, 'I miss my home' (96.6). Kironmoyee would often say to her husband that their daughter had grown up and she should be married now. Sudhamoy would reply, '*she will have to study further and then take up a job. And then if she likes then only she will be married*' (96.1). Such was the ideology of the father for personal freedom of the daughter. When Kironmoyee urged him for sending Maya to her uncle's place he would say, '*why can't she study here? Have schools and colleges been abolished? What may happen to Maya as a Hindu girl may happen to any of the Muslim girl also.*' (96.1). The faith in law and order and hope for communal harmony is the life support for the family. Singing used to be once the passion of Kironmoyee, she had to quit it after facing criticism of the people of the other caste saying Hindu women are shameless to sing in the public, sitting in front of many men. She could never collect herself later for singing even in front of Sudhamoy. Her motherhood was in tatters when she was unable to stop those hooligans kidnap Maya. Her hope

that one day Maya will come back is alive until she heard the news that a body looking like Maya was floating under the bridge. This left the entire house ‘unnaturally still’ and silence prevailed forever. At the end, Kironmoyee is ‘...praying for a life free from worries and anxieties, insecurities, torture and death’ (215.2)

The inner accent, the voice of heart, love and affection, which comes naturally to men and women, was so with Suranjan and Maya too. Maya’s four year love relation with Jahangir was on crossroad. She is unable to reconcile how Jahangir can leave her and wish to go to America and settle there forever. ‘...how could his dreams of America make him forget ..’ all those happy moments they spent together, those talks of their marriage. ‘How could Jahangir’s vision of grandeur make him forsake his living prize, Maya?’ (97.2) She tried her best but she could not forget him. She felt very safe with him, so much that she would prefer to leave her home during riots and live with him. In the blossoming environ, harmony is eternal. In spite of growing fundamentalism in the country two hearts from different religions fall in love and decide to be together forever. But the minority one is always dejected and that befalls the agony and anguish. She became financial helpless also when she lost two of her tuition students. One left for India and the other’s father insisted to have ‘Muslim tutor’. The question of safety arose only with her when Parul, her best friend told her that Maya’s staying at her place for long is not safe. Maya is the most unfortunate character to meet with her doom. She becomes the victim of the horrible face of communalism. ‘Frenzied and savage seven young men’ forcefully entered their house, damaged the furniture and abducted Maya. She had never returned to her happy family to cherish the blessings of the parents and love of her brother.

Suranjan, the protagonist of the novel, was a bright student and full of ideas. He and his friends, Haider, Bilal, Pulok, Goon and many more used to have long intellectual discourse on political revival, reformation in law and order, Marxism etc. They did revolutionary rallies and made the authorities accept their demands. He was also elected member of the college governing body on behalf of the student union. As the novel begins, Suranjan lies inactive in his bed. Once used to be very active boy has now turned apathetic. He developed sheer disinterest in almost everything happening around him. His mind recalls riots of 1990 when his family sought the shelter to his Muslim friends. Today he remains motionless. He does not feel like going to anywhere and request for shelter. The newspaper words pierce in his eyes, the sound of news from TV goes inherently to his ears. He does not react to all these. Being indifferent was not his personal choice today. How can one, and that too a passionate youth like Suranjan, be apathetic in such external uproar. But there was underlying a mayhem to which he was unable to cope with. Lot of questions in his mind were unanswered. He was not able to reconcile the obvious partiality done to him for him being Hindu. Like his sister, he too has loved Parveen. A girl, once used to vow to die for him has left him for the reason he denied to convert himself to Muslim. She had cried her heart out but their wish to be with each other remained only a joyful recollection. After Parveen’s marriage to a Muslim businessman, Suranjan met a girl named Ratna, whom he liked to marry but could not confess. On their first meeting Ratna asked him, ‘what do you like?’ he replied, ‘to move around. To meet people’. ‘Don’t you like trees, rivers..?’ She asked. ‘Yes, I do. But most of all I like people. There is a romance or a mystery within every man.... And I love to explore those unknown recesses of the human mind.’ (78.2) Suranjan enjoyed the euphoria of being with humans, loving them, observing them, talking to them and attain the perfect ecstasy. People’s discrimination on the name of religion was not acceptable to him.

Haider, Parveen's brother and Suranjan's best friend, has always been with him in most of his revolutionary errands of rising national cultural spirit and human rights. Together, they would have logical arguments and rational discourse. Recently, Suranjan see lot of change in Haider and he observes that Haider convinces him a lot to stop expecting from this country. The cold response of Haider in searching Maya or convincing his parents for Parveen annoys him terribly. Suranjan's quest for harmonious environment in the country never ends. He could not patch up the obvious discrepancy within the country which obstructed peace and harmony. Can killing and torturing poor and minority bring peace? If so why do we live in more terror and fear? Can religion supersede nationality? Then what about those martyrs who laid their lives for the independence of the nation, irrespective of their religion. Suranjan is desperately looking for that inner blithe that can satiate his quench for equality and harmony. Can revenge give him that joy as others are seeking? He breeds a bizarre wish to fulfil his desire. He roams around the city and stops Shamima, a whore, takes her home and rapes her brutally. Sadistic pleasure by raping a Muslim girl and thereby taking revenge on all Hindus, who have abducted his beloved sister, Maya, turns out a false justification he gives to himself. His rationality enlightens him that '*she (Shamima) was tricked by her social status.*' (203.2) Suranjan realises that it was not revenge but a kind of defeat for him only.

The family, with shattered dreams, has lost all hope now for any miracle to happen that can reorganise the jigsaw pieces of their life. They give up and decide to quit this country in search of peace and harmony. Instead of those fundamentalists and extremists feeling *Shame*, Sudhamoy feels *shame* in declaring to his son that '*they would go to India.*' (216.6)

Conclusion

Religious fundamentalism is like termite that rots the societies and cultures. Communalism shakes the roots of the people and forces them to accept what they disbelieve. It conflicts with humanitarian values. Can a fair and honest government assure communal harmony? Can a developmental focus reduce this menace of communalism? Why even rely on political correctness? Beyond it lays spiritual correctness. Spiritual correctness offers caring or considerate things not because social convention requires it, but because love inspires it. Humanity is above any religious, political or social concerns. 'Lajja', is an effort to convey the message of humanity in its rudimentary style. India, since centuries, holds very strong spiritual base. The integration of several cultures have become possible to India because of its spiritual support. India must lead the world and re-establish faith, peace and harmony. After all, what matters to human is ultimate internal peace and extreme happiness within.

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