

Partition lies, Advaita Vedanta and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*

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Darkness is the privation of light qua the good. St. Augustine of Hippo (354 A.D. – 430 A.D.) saw evil as the privation of the good :

In addressing the problem of evil, Augustine blended basic Stoic presuppositions regarding cosmic harmony and intelligibility with the Neoplatonic interpretation of evil as a privation of the good. (Torchia 817)

Long before Augustine, Advaita Vedanta located imperfect sublation as the cause of perceiving the universe as dark. Before proceeding further, we need to digress and recapitulate the meaning of Advaita Vedanta. Advaita Vedanta is not amenable to translation and is loosely conflated with absolute non-qualified monism. Yet monism is a very Eurocentric concept. Non-qualified non-dualism (or absolute monism) has been popularized by Sri Śaṅkarācārya (circa 8th century A.D.), but in fact he is preceded by the likes of Sri Gaudapadacharya (circa 8th century A.D.) et al. Adi Śaṅkarācārya was followed by the likes of Sri Madhavacharya (circa 14th century A.D.). For the most up to date developments within the field of Advaita Vedanta, Rangaswami Sudhakshina's introduction to her recent translation of Sri Shankaracharya's corpus is the most accessible. Rangaswami is by far the most lucid author on this subject and her understanding of this philosophy and its lineages and its effects on India as a nation is worthy of serious scholarly scrutiny.

There is little scope here to go into the cosmology of Advaita Vedanta --- the problem posed by this school of Hindu philosophy is that it admits of no cosmology and annihilates differences between the knower and the known. Simply put, it is not possible to understand Advaita Vedanta for the praxis involved in the act of understanding presupposes an object to be understood and someone striving to understand. The best one can do is to refer

to movies like *The Matrix* (1999). In this movie units of computer programs act as if they have volition and agency in a contingent world. But within the worldview of Advaita Vedanta such referentially prescriptive terms as volition is meaningless. This is so since human agency and the contingencies involved in being volitional are only tangible if there is an unmoved mover; within non-Hindu paradigms; this is the logos. Advaita Vedanta presupposes no possibility of us ever knowing the whatness of the Heideggerian being in time. There is no concept of time with which we are aware of in various historiographies since time and the being are never separate in this understanding of Indian history. All histories as we know it are either narratives forwarding the linear view of time as narrated by Semitic exegetes. What passes off as Indian historiography is an effort to teach Western empiricists that we as a nation too have a history, which is posited against the charge leveled at us by empiricists claiming Indians to be more mythopoeic and thus less rigorous. In this process of collusion within empirical ideologies we have moved away from a worldview which is authentic. Eurocentric hermeneutics do not account for the fallacy that it is a real possibility that our seeing is skewed to the extent that accepted historiographies may be illusory and thus, inaccurate. Hinduism calls this seeing, darśana, which is roughly what we misread as philosophy. Hindu metaphysics is concerned with seeing things as they are and thereby resists the urge to construct self-serving histories. In the context of this collection of essays and contemporary subaltern urges in history-writing; a Hindu view of life dismisses reductive and accepted forms of reading partition literature and the factuality of 1947. This essay will perform its historical work by attempting to revise accepted but fallacious history-making with what will be proved an authentic assessment of the partition event in general, and in particular through the lens of Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974). We need to now return to our discussion of the nature of evil qua darkness in Augustinian theology since we began with the premise that darkness is the privation of the good. The difference between Advaita

Vedanta with Augustinian theology is that the latter sees evil as a negation of God's presence while the former sees everything as permeated by an effulgent golden hued entity normatively compared with the splendor of the sun: "Adhitya varna thamasathu pare"/["That Purusha who is] lustrous as the Sun [is] beyond darkness" (*Rigveda* 10.90). The title of Bhisham Sahni's novel is an explicit reference to this Upanishadic concept of darkness (*Tamas* 71), it is "past midnight" (*Tamas* 6); "late in the night" (*Tamas* 9) and even the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas in this novel stand eternally in "dark corners" with "wily eyes" (*Tamas* 308) reinforcing our sense of both the privations of light and goodness, here attributable to our imperfect sublation over the world we interact/exist with/in through our senses/gunas. *Tamas* is the cry of the Upanishadic seer to the Purusha to pull us out of the dreaded cognitive darkness, that is, from *tamas* to light, *jyotir*: "तमसोमा ज्योतिर् गमया। / Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya / From darkness, lead me to light" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.3.28). When Sahni named his novel *Tamas*, his authorial act was to consciously impose a Vendantist reading of the novel. Therefore the novel is open to being read as an effort to change our hermeneutics of reading Indian literatures in English, and in particular literatures dealing with partition. Chapter 6 of the novel is an implicit prescription of re-reading *Tamas* according to the tenets of Hinduism.

Admittedly *Tamas* was written in Hindi but its wider renown is through its English avatar. Hence our engagement with it will allow us to construct a truer mode of reading Indian novels about the partition as well as critique established modes of thinking about Indian literatures in English and those in the vernaculars. Marxist historiography which led to the subaltern movement compels the Indian critic to miss the crucial points that contemporary secularism and our ideas of the modern and the postmodern, the transcultural are all glosses on the *Torah*. The major thinkers of our times beginning from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Derrida to Judith Butler to Martha Nussbaum are all Jews and their anxieties for

rejecting the Yahweh of the Jews is in reality what we mistake as liberal discourses; the extrapolations of the Continental Enlightenment discourse. This author had questioned Martha Nussbaum when she was in Kolkata in 2008 with the easily overlooked fact that she is a fervent Jew --- which she denied in front of a public audience that winter. Yet anyone who is familiar with the life of Nussbaum would know how deeply she feels about Judaism and her personal involvement in various synagogue activities. Hiding this aspect of her life, she proclaims moral relativism and definite unorthodox (from Rabbinic points of views) commentaries on virtually every aspect of moral and judicial life. The Jewish religion does not admit of heresies like cosmopolitanism which is the pet theme of Nussbaum; on the other hand Judaism emphasizes the Shema: “Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad” (*Deuteronomy* 6:4). Hence it is evident that contemporary historiographies and most philosophizing is a talk between Jews whose anxiety with the Shema informs their internal talks and we mistake them for liberal humanism. This evasion borne out of anxiety about being Jewish has poisoned Indian academics. Judaism has supplanted Hinduism as the preferred hermeneutical apparatus when we read Indian novels in English and study 1947 within the history of the Indian subcontinent. For example, the Jewish Emmanuel Lévinas finally shifted his focus to glossing the *Torah*. The subaltern studies’ group erred by not recognizing the role of Judaism in all works which pass off as post-modern; post-structural. It often elides the otherwise scrupulous scholar that Karl Marx was a Jew revolting against the hierarchy of the rabbis. This hatred for rabbinic power he extrapolated to the realm of politics and economics, thus ironically sanctifying both with the presence of the very spectre of the Yahweh he abhorred. This has been the problem of secularism as constructed by all Jewish thinkers.

Established forms of Indian critiques in English of literatures in English and in our vernaculars tend to miss the point that Indian literature is not only open to the subaltern

critical gaze but can afford to be pressurized by other modes of philosophies of the human person. This is a malaise within Indian academia both residing in the country and those abroad: Romila Thapar is an academic who has repeatedly disowned the possibility of the genuine conversion of King Ashoka and thereby relegated the mystique of conversion to social needs. She did not hesitate to rob Ashoka of personal freedom while she herself would tout and vouch for the need for her to follow what is dubiously termed the scientific method in historiography. Thapar would not ever disagree about the transcendent presence of acrimony, hatred et al but would not hesitate to use false syllogisms to prove her contention that India's religious movements were all expressions of materialist forces. The resounding echo within Indian academia, both in India and abroad, is a repetition of Gayatri Spivak's ideas shaped by her training as a translator of Derrida and later on, as a purveyor of Ranajit Guha's powerful readings of Indian history. It is interesting to note that Spivak had done her Ph.D. on W.B. Yeats from the University of Calcutta. Is it possible that she turned rabidly atheistical as a reaction to the Father (vide psychoanalytic dyads), in her case the symbolic order of the metaphysical constructed by the theosophical Yeats? Also Derrida's works speak of the trace to God that runs through epistemology. Nowhere has Derrida denied the existence of transcendence; as Adi Śaṅkarācārya has nowhere really said the world we inhabit does not exist. To impute these ideas to these thinkers betrays shallow study of both Derrida and Adi Śaṅkarācārya. Spivak and Guha settled in the First World and earned their reputations through bigoted readings of both history and literature. Neither had been professional philosophers; in which case their damage to Indology/Indian studies would have been much less. This paves the way for subsuming the Indian literary space by an onslaught of the distortion of Leftist ideologies and the rejection of any unified Indian system of thought.

The partition of India in phases is an actual historical event. Yet *Tamas* is not history. So we need to revisit the idea of partition. How can we define the event of the partition of India for our purpose of constructing a more relevant historiography of our past? First let us recapitulate the main trends which define the partition for the Indian critic who writes in English on the topic: the partition is man-made, the partition caused dislocation of the psyche, and the partition was teleological in the sense that it was inevitable due to historical processes beyond the control of both sides of the then undivided India. In other words, the partition is perceived to contain many contradictory currents simultaneously. It was historically inevitable; it was at the same time *beyond* history since the British divided us on religious lines and also acted as catalysts to the process leading to the partition *event*. For the sake of the sanities of all involved the partition had to occur in a particular *here and the now*. To think it otherwise would prove to be unbearable and therefore history and literature collude to construct a fixity called the partition of India. To conceive of the partition as a recurring event, as a type of event rather than fixed moments in history would lead us to re-live in our times uncertainties and would lead to clinical deviancy in the form of memory disorders and the broader spectrum of schizoid disorders. The process of self-inflicted amnesia of the partition as it is¹ (sic) has occurred in three ways in Indian academics: through Marxist interrogations of the structures of power which led to the partition; a coming to terms with the partition event through a huge corpus of fiction about the event and finally through a denial of the actuality of the event². Now it is largely accepted that the partition is a reversible process which will occur with the cessation of hostilities between India and Pakistan; India and Bangladesh. But again that is a way to not accept the reality of the partition *event*.

Therefore the time has come to enact a *refoulement* of the repression which affect our process of sublation of the world. *Tamas* is a fictional gesture goading us to revise our understanding of India, of the *event* of the partition and finally of our existing hegemonic ideologies which deny that India is even a nation, or for that matter Pakistan is a nation. To understand the partition we may refer not only to Advaita Vedanta, but also to Martin Heidegger and to Giorgio Agamben. And finally to the revival of the Pre-Socratic philosophy of *cosmopolitanism* as now articulated by Kwame Appiah and Martha Nussbaum. Also of some importance are the works of Mary Douglas and Wendy Doniger since with the idea of partition is concurrent the idea of purity and pollution which lead to the process of othering. *Tamas* particularly deals with this concept of pollution since it is the killing of a pig which sets in motion a chain of events which end in us reviewing the true mission of partition literature.

Martin Heidegger through his readings of the German Idealists formed the idea of the human person which has not been supplanted till date. Even Derrida's much vaunted delogocentricism, or Laçan's construction of the symbolic order/other vis-à-vis the latter's reading of Freud, has not been able to negotiate and annihilate from Western philosophy the Heideggerian concept of the *dasein*. The *dasein* as a term for the entirety of the human person is more felicitous within the domain of literature since the literary space is a unique space and literary characters are in their strictest sense; not real; therefore not historically verifiable. *Tamas* is literature not because it is historically accurate. It is literature since it transforms history into archetypes and the *event* of the partition into one with not teleological ends but one which is mythopoeic and ontological³. To speak of literary characters as if they exist in some Neo-Platonic manner is to speak without rigour. One should see the literary character as

a construction/site of contingencies which are threatened eliding eudamonia forever. This is the dasein which exists and *Tamas* is itself not a text but a hermeneutic of the limitations of historical freedom, of choices of evil⁴; of concepts of historiography. For instance, the historical/religious taboo of the Muslims in regard to the pig is not merely to be seen as an Islamic injunction against the butchering of swine within the context of this hermeneutics. Rather since *Tamas* is considered mainstream literature, the pig in question allows us to (mis)read it simultaneously as a symbol of the partition itself by echoing the Bible (*Mark* 5:13) and finally by evoking the nuanced works of Mary Douglas and Wendy Doniger. Douglas reads *Leviticus* and Doniger reads Indian taboos investing deeper significance to the slaughtered pig. Their reading redeem the pig as a clichéd metaphor in Islam as representational of what is taboo; the pig's slaughter precipitates the tension in *Tamas* because it is symbolic of the expression of what is inexpressible. In short, the pig is the Id, the psychoanalytic repressed. The pig becomes a powerful trope of abjection and can be connected to William Golding's Piggy in his *The Lord of the Flies* (1954).

So where does Advaita Vedanta come into the fabric of this novel which critics unanimously consider a powerful critique of religious fanaticism? The idea of Advaita Vedanta is that by the process of vikshepa/sublation the world is seen to be divided; the universality of all life elides the dasein since according to Advaita Vedanta, there occurs an investure of the world which is false, much akin to the parallax error. The falsity is not with the world as it is, but with the dasein. So the dasein as we understand the term, is false since our cognition of the world is false according to Advaita Vedanta.

Advaita Vedanta clearly states that unless the dasein learns to see the world as it is, peace will never be possible. So the historiography posited by this astika school of Indian philosophy predicts that the teleology of being in *tamas* will be war, divisions and finally annihilation of life as we know it. The apocalyptic nature of *Tamas* is not Bhisham Sahni's own creation; it is his unconscious assimilation of Advaita Vedanta much in the manner Freud imagined the psychic apparatus to be. The anxiety that runs throughout the text is in fact a coming to terms with the inevitability and factuality of evil due to ignorance on the part both of the Hindus, the Sikhs and the Muslims. So unless the dasein chooses *para-Vidya* over *apara-Vidya*; the event of the partition will be repeated over and over again. The psychic dislocation within this novel is in fact a failure on the part of the dasein which is optical in as much as Indian philosophy is about the act of seeing; that is of hermeneutics. The dasein in *Tamas* are forced by their inabilities to come to terms with their historical moment since they do not know of their own *tamas*; in the words of the Advaitins; the dasein within partition literature are in deep sleep. Everything therefore is a dream, albeit nightmarish. The state of being asleep is a recurrent motif in Vedanta. We are in a world of simulation and lead ignorantly vegetative lives; sleeping our days out.

One of the tropes that the hermeneutic constructed by *Tamas* is that of bestiality; of wo/men being interested in animals. Liza was keener to know of "the kind of work the Association for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals" (*Tamas* 109) did for animals than she was in Richard and the natives around her. Within both the Abrahamic religions and within Advaita Vedanta, animals are not dasein since they are presumed to be unaware of the historicity of their beings. The point here is not whether they are self-aware; but it is agreed by ethologists and primatologists that animals have circadian awareness and circadian cycles but not any sense of historiography and temporality. The dasein in *Tamas* are bestial in the sense that due to their absolute bondage to the Vedantist's concept of *Maya*; they fail to

realize their essence; thus they undermine the very concept of the dasein and give in to the seduction of the inhuman since in *Tamas* “human values were of little consequence” (*Tamas* 146). So we can now proceed to see the historical event of the partition as inevitable, archetypal and infinitely repeatable and finally, as a negation of the dasein. It has little to do with the various well known imperial policies of the British Raj, and the structural critiques in vogue while assessing partition literature are in fact reductionist and do not take into account either Indian philosophies or Western mainstream philosophy. The prevailing critique of the partition is itself an effort to hold on to departmental chairs and to propagate outmoded forms of hegemonic ideologies which even their own proponents cannot any longer accept. This article calls for an urgent revision in our comprehension of both the historiography of partition, the hermeneutics of partitions and the very event of the partition.

The Shoah is considered unique and it in the reference to the Shoah that Agamben has postulated his theory of the dasein rendered abject but nonetheless sacred. The paradox being, that sanctity has no meaning after the Shoah. As mentioned above, the *event* of the partition will recur unless we shift the paradigms of our hermeneutics. The Shoah, by the same logic, will be a repetitious phenomenon. In *Tamas* there is an explicit call for studying abjection. The dasein who is normatively Nathu is a victim of his ignorance and not merely of the privation of economic freedom leading to his social marginalization in a manner which is reminiscent of the hen-egg paradox. The economic compulsion which degrades and makes the dasein automata is secondary to the real cause of the *dasein* in this hermeneutic space; the dasein being in *tamas*. There are pogroms in *Tamas*, but everything is a result of being *tamasic* as against being either driven by *rajas* or the *swattik gunas*. Thus Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of the dasein as *homo sacer* is an extrapolation of Advaita Vedanta and is found within *Tamas* as constructions of beings within time who commit absolute evil, or are victims or are our imperial masters because of specific historical events since they are

ignorant by choice. Their historicity arise out of their errors of seeing/ darśana of the world they struggle within. They do not seek mukti. The historical causes of the riots in *Tamas* are indeed real, the British Raj is even to this day real since such historians as Niall Fergusson keep telling us that colonialism was good for us and Africa; and the social matrices which gave rise to the factuality of *Tamas* are true. But these are the namarupa, the real cause of these events is universal and explicated by Advaita Vedanta. The partition did occur, but the cause of the partition is not a solely imperial project as defined by Edward Said or Homi Bhava. Their contentions are only analyses of the effect of erroneous sublation/investure of the here and the now by the *dasein*. They missed the real cause of the current state of life in *the here and the now*; the holocaust is not unique in the sense that depravity will recur unless we acknowledge that cosmopolitanism is true. Advaita Vedanta lays down the guidelines for interrupting this cycle of dislocations, genocides and partition-like events. Therefore, the central problem of *Tamas* is one which is universal; that is, it is the problem of evil. And the problem endures since we choose not to see as we should see the world. This does not mean that there is only one way of seeing; if such were the case then anekattavada would not exist in all branches of Indian darśana. All the above is constructed in an effort to reconstruct a new historiography of being Indian but also to show the fallacy of those who will not admit that either an India exists or there is faith called Hinduism. Thus, a Hindu reading of *Tamas* is all the more urgent. The Sugirtharajahs of this world may not agree, but then they do Indian Studies sitting in Britain; not too different from either Gayatri Spivak or the late Ranajit Guha.

End Notes:

1. That is, moored within time and space and arising out of relatively uncomplicated imperial forces beginning with the coming of the Turks to India and before that of Alexander the Great in 326 B.C. If the partition is seen as a monad; with potential and inevitable recurrence; then the scholar is unhinged. History has to create a narrative with a chronological arrow ending something. But the mind is troubled if there is no end in sight.
2. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988) by Amitav Ghosh, the sense of denial of the truth of national borders pervades the work to the point where Ghosh seems to forget that there is indeed a nation like Bangladesh and Pakistan. These two countries through their constitutions consciously reject Ghosh's contention that all religions are the same and identity is simply a social construct. To reject the claims of these two sovereign nations would be on the part of political scientists and authors a claim to superior knowledge and hegemonic, uncritical denigration of those nations' law-makers. Therefore, the very idea that nations are human constructs has within it the roots of bigotry and cultural arrogance.
3. This contradicts the previous claim in this article that partition is seen by mainstream historians and critics even in reference to *Tamas* as teleological. The point here is to show that such readings are falsification of truths and are to be rejected. So while this

author began by saying *Tamas* is considered universally as teleological, yet in truth is literature precisely because it is ontological.

4. Since eudamonia is impossible we are left with evil; which is defined by its persistence and reality.

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