The Con(Textual) Contours of *Lajja*: A (Re)Visioning of the Social Praxis in the Indian Subcontinent

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"We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday".
Samuel Beckett, *Proust*

In the Indian subcontinent today we witness the prevalence of at least three major societal systems: a different ordering of the social values leading to different priorities in personal and community life. Such social systems are: (a) the modern Western (the current face of humanism), (b) the absorptionist or mystic society, (c) the community society. Ironically enough, each of them embodies values fundamentally opposed to each other and it so happens that the said conflict of values is traceable through all fields of human endeavour. However, the present day social praxis in the Indian subcontinent belongs to the last category—the macro social system which engenders strong feelings of solidarity and fraternity amongst the believers with the society developing a quasi-ontological reality of its own, and in the least analysis taking precedence over the individual. This type of society has a tendency towards exclusionism in that those outside the circle of believers are not taken lightly. Eventually after all, the covert or overt aspiration of those subscribing to such a value system is to occupy the entire space and therefore anyone outside the frame is either converted through persuasion or tactical pressure, or he can be thrown out penalized, or, if so, killed without any mercy. This absolute assertion of the faith is also contingent upon insecurity, the lack of proper confidence in the faith itself, because of a threatening presence of 'the other' in the same field.[1] History, in this perspective, reveals itself not so much as an evolutionary progression, but a see-saw of alternate victories

and defeats for competing value systems. Taslima Nasrin in her major work, *Lajja* uses the aforesaid model to analyse the macro-conflicts she observes in the subcontinent, through the exploration of the micro-dimension of such a conflict in the fragmented, homogenized and functionally differentiated Bangla society, which promotes, as it appears, the cause of a self-reflexive distopia. She makes an attempt to construct the fictive world, in which the events unfold thus, paving the way for a socio-historical enactment of what constitutes 'reality' for the contending communities. In this paper our objective is to re-read *Lajja* with a view to bring out its contemporary social and historical significance. The basic idea, for that matter, is to work from an analysis of the emergent socio-cultural patterns, which are but a sort of aggravation of and ultimate exasperation with the problem of 'representation.'

I

It is a sociological truth that when identities develop larger territorial dimensions or intensity, or when individuals experience restlessness; group associations develop distorted features and tend to flare up in uncontrollable forms.[2] Among the worst affected by this process was the Hindu-Muslim relationship in which the old balances and patterns were disrupted, leading to mistrust and suspicion on a larger scale. Nevertheless, the Hindu-Muslim conflict can be perceived embryonically as an unforeseen off-shoot of the British civilizational interference in the Indian subcontinent, creating the scope for some deliberately political exploitation later. The partition moreover bequeathed a confused legacy to both successor states, as the two nation theory failed to manifest in a clear-cut division along the communal lines. The inter-personal moral order that Gandhi had envisioned as the basis of national life receded under the impact of communal frenzy. Society, thus inevitably, sacrificed what the Mahatma would assert, 'the common moral space' in which all religious and non-religious systems must participate.

II

However, soon after the cataclysm of the partition and the communal frenzy thereof, Indian society adopted multi-religious secularism and endeavoured to integrate the communities - Christians, Jews and Muslims - within the logic of its group structure. It was possible for

them to adopt this society, because their distinctive community structure was not threatened - they were/are however respected as distinct groups amongst other groups. The penchant for cooperation and the adaptability of the host society thus occasioned the gradual evolution of a shared life. But in recent years, the cutting edge of monotheistic dualism or absorptive Hinduism remains susceptible to activation (may be, in the service of political, economic and other ends) leading to a catastrophic disintegration of the established social modes of intercourse.

III

The history of Bangladesh, however, proves to be a continuous series of victories and defeats, punctuated by stages of impasse or mutual frustration, after which the value systems have revived in new forms. The retreat of British imperialism has spelt the defeat of individualism, the forced ouster of the Pakistan ārmy in 1971 and the independence gained thereof also rung the death-knell of Jinnah's dream of a separate Muslim nation. The steps taken by the rulers (both civil and military), thereafter, have crystallized ideological camps asserting distinct opposite values. The initial attempt by Mujibur Rehman to transform Bangladesh into a non-communal and secular society ('Sonar Bangla') through appropriate educational and legislative measures has failed to woo the majority. Inevitably, the decision-makers have found themselves faced with unforeseen difficulties. The democratic, electoral political system, functioning within a multi-religious society has become vulnerable to irrepressible populism with potentially explosive consequences. The strong anti-religious orientation of the educational programme and the deculturing modes of mass entertainment have driven the Bangla society over the years, as it appears, towards at least a negative secularism (of course, in contravention of the earlier vouchsafed ideals), that is towards non-belief or hedonism, instead of towards a positive interpretation of humanism. Such a rot in the common psyche has remained instrumental for the emergence of a new era of conflict perpetrated and fanned by Islamic fundamentalism.

Conflict and religious rancour, thus occasioned, has led to crisis and the minorities (especially the Hindus) have failed to negotiate with such intractable complex emergencies. They remain marginalized. The human costs in terms of lives lost and innocent suffering continues to be extremely high. Democracy proves to

be a mockery. An inept administration and self-seeking leaders contribute to the canker, but it is for the non-partisan and forward-looking sections within the macro society to redress and restore normalcy in the situation. But the modernizers redefine tradition to suit modern conditions, and it is the more radical, aggressive and defensive responses to enforced modernization that helps to provoke the communal conundrum. Further, the reaction of the conservatives appears unethical, irrational and at times reactionary. Professional politicians with narrow short-term interests go slow on tight-rope walking. Inevitably, there is scope for an imbalanced and unstable triangle of forces emerging from a disturbed and conflict- ridden society.

Ironically enough the leaders in both communities (Hindu and Muslim), who have scripted their careers around the schism, play their respective roles on either side of the divide. Cocooned as they are in the narrow by-lane of their myopic interests, they would not like to venture out of their limited principality, lest they should lose their hegemony over a few. As for the Jamat-i-Islami (the leading community-friendly group), they are so bent upon on being politically correct all the time that whenever such outrages take place they think that blaming the party in power alone is enough. The administration may have goofed on several fronts, but why cannot those who claim to be committed to upholding the cause of peace try and evolve at least an informal mechanism to resolve the issue?

It so appears, and Taslima has rightly articulated it, that no one is really serious about solving the crisis. A demonstration or even a casual protest won't do, it merely reflects an apathetic concern. The victims are always there to accept their lot. It is widely seen and often experienced that the managers of communal frenzy and rancour go scot-free and the common populace, represented here by the Duttas, are already at the receiving end. Taslima's heart probably bleeds with the agony she perceives, and the inner strife, she suffers from, demands expression. In the Preface, she admits thus:

I detest fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason I wrote *Lajja*... (which) deals with the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh by the Muslims who are in the majority ... *Lajja* is a document of our collective defeat (p. ix).

IV

The Duttas in the fictive world of *Lajja* are an isolated lot, removed from the prevalent reality, the general ethos. They belong to no where,

not to the Hindu world outside, nor to the predominantly Muslim world of Bangladesh either. They have no roots that they can claim. Their loyalties always remain questionable; not necessarily because of what they do, but because of what they are expected to do — they represent an alien race whose interests lie outside of Bangladesh. Their fate is tied up with the fate of Bangla society, which never accepts them as its natural integral ingredient. They were, as it were, the victims of cumulative historical deprivation.

Taslima's tongue-in-cheek rancour gravitates against such a deprivation. She appears to uphold the cause of a just political order championing the commitments of a constitutional system with a strong emphasis on the pursuit of formal equality of all and an even-handed application of the law. She admits her "determination to continue the battle against religious persecution, genocide and communalism' (p. ix). She reminds us of the games politicians have played among both the communities on either side of the fence from time to time and the communal passions thus whipped up by them to suit their politics of self-interest based on hatred. But these games would not have succeeded to the extent they did, if the Hindus and the Muslims had known each other better, if they had grown together from the childhood as one community rather than two separate worlds within one nation, within the subcontinent. Taslima declares unequivocally: 'I for one will not be silenced' (p. x). She refers to the 'demolition of the sixteenth century edifice, which had struck a savage blow to the sentiments of Muslims in India and elsewhere' (p. 3). In order to corroborate her point-of-view she quotes the news paper report stating thus:

> ...a malignant situation has taken form in India, the pain caused by it will be felt all over the world and most certainly by her immediate neighbours (p. 3).

Further, as per her estimation, what was going on in India was a small change compared to what happened in Dhaka. There is a lot of violence - killing and looting, the Hindu shrines are set on fire, the Hindu households are torched giving way to a pervading sense of macabre - anything and everything only has its way. When a mob is out for blood and vengeance, who else is there to settle scores with them - the Hindu minority are mere spectators, the victims of genocide.

Dhaka is already a kind of microcosm of Bangladesh as a whole: a new centre-less city, in which the contending communities and the various classes have lost touch with each other, because each is

isolated in his own geographical, and even psychic, compartment. What then has become of the social dynamics, the historical and the dialectic in such a schema? The group dynamics has been obliterated, history faces a premature collapse and the dialectic simply been displaced - and it is this very displacement that informs what is paradoxical about our times. No longer attached to temporality, no longer clinging to historicity or the temporal mechanics of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, the dialectic is to be resumed and recognized in the real, effective contradictions of space.[3]

V

The Duttas no matter how solitary, are still somehow engaged in the social substance, their very solitude is social. In search of their self identity, they face a Sisyphean situation, every attempt in the appropriate direction meets absurdity. They face a series of unreconciled cross-purposes, which get heightened as they confront the dominant social ethos. They, inevitably, remain 'the other' in their own homeland, and, therefore, the cry for a relationship of reciprocal co-equality is denied to them.

There is often a sustained plea for conversion. Love fails to entice. Marriages remain conditional. Suranjan's love for Parveen is questioned. He is asked to convert before marriage. When Maya escapes into Parul's house on the eve of the communal rancour and at the thick of frenzy, she does not have a good time there, the haunting eyes of the visitors often taunt her. Belal comes all the way to console Suranjan and the Duttas, but in course of conversation he also gives vent to his pent-up emotion. He says:

> I really don't know what is happening all around us. ... mean while in India, they are continuously killing us.
> What do you mean by 'us' ? Birupaksha asked.
> Muslims.
> Oh, I see.
> When they get such news from India, these people naturally lose their heads. Whom can you blame? We are dying there, and you here...[4]

The point here is Belal's apparent sympathy, but on an implicit plane he also discovers a reason behind such a nefarious act. His rational self identifies with Suranjan, but at the back of his mind, the communal self derives vicarious pleasure out of his friend's suffering. It is a typical situation; as if the stimulation of ceaseless differentiation promotes the accelerating commodification of social relations and

the obliteration of moral relationship with 'the other'. It speaks of a new realm of barbarity which receives their (Belal's, Haider's, Kamal's - all friends to Surajan) tacit consent, without provoking any resistance. Even the elders who were swearing earlier, in the name of secularism, keep silent. Taslima raises the basic question:

> Secularism was supposed to be one of the strong beliefs of Bengali Muslims, especially during the war for independence, when everyone had to co-operate with one another to win victory. What had happened to all these people after independence was won? Did they not notice the seeds of communalism being sown in the national frame work? Were they not agitated? ... But why were all those warm blooded people as cold as reptiles today? Why did they not sense how urgent it was to uproot the sapling of communalism immediately? How could they nurse the impossible notion that democracy could come to stay in a country in the absence of secularism? ... (p. 55)

The querry remains unanswered, which suggests not only the plight of Hindu minority, but also the insensitive and callous ways of the Bangladeshi Muslims; none of them was shown as liberal, progressive and non-communal.[5]

In contrast, the Duttas were a peculiar lot. During the partition, when there was a large scale exodus, Sudhamoy's father Sukumar Dutta stood determined not to betray the values he had always upheld, his version was more pragmatic than patriotic: "If there is no security in your own country, where in this world can we go looking for it?" (p. 6) For all of them (Sukumar, Sudhamoy and even Suranjan) Bangladesh is their homeland. All through the same question is raised. Sudhamoy is often found reminiscing the days of 1952 - Language Movement, 1962 - Education Movement, 1966- Six Clause Movement, 1969 - National Movement, 1970 - General Election and finally, the Freedom Movement of 1971, and how all through he stood committed to the cause. It is more of a national identity he was concerned about. Here Taslima's comments are worth remembering:

> An independence that was carried out at the cost of three million Bengali lives proved that religion could not be the basis of a national identity (p.8).

Sudhamoy time and again evades the idea of escaping into India. Kironmoyee's appeal, the persuasion of close relatives like Nonigopal, Haripada and Nemai go unattended. Even at the thick of suffering in the hands of fellow countrymen, he does not harbour such an idea. He stands perplexed, as in his action and articulation he is never a Hindu either. He does not observe any ritual, Kironmoyee never pours vermilion on the partings of her hair, nor

does she wear the conch shells and bangles. In their action and vision, the Duttas prove to be atheists, they remain humanistic. Yet they are situated in a space (only because they were born in a Hindu household), wherefrom they are forced to negotiate with the adversities. During the Freedom movement of 1971 they had to willfully accept Muslim names (for instance Sudhamoy was Shirajuddin Hussain, Kironmoyee was Fatema Akhtar) to escape the passionate torments perpetrated by Pakistani army. But now, the devil is in the heads of their own countrymen, from whom there is no respite.

Sudhamoy's family suffered at Mymensingh (their original home setting). Maya was kidnapped, when she was a six year old school-going child, the local hoodlums torture them in many ways, either by forcing their entry into the Dutta's orchard or by writing anonymous letters hinting at a ransom. After being forced to sell the homestead of the fore-fathers with a paltry sum to one, Shaukat Ali, Sudhamoy moves to Dhaka to spend 'a peaceful life' of a medicine practitioner; the idea being, in a city, more so in the capital, people have less time for such nasty deals. But it is all the way the same thing; the majority dictating terms to the minority and snatching away whatever little the latter acquire through their long striving. It is, as if, there is no way in which the Duttas can break through 'the one insurmountable barrier that stands between them and a peaceful life' (p.16). The geographical shift from Mymensingh to Dhaka brings with it a lot of problems. The tall old building, the terrace with a long stretch of land, in and around it, is now replaced by a dingy, sticky, tiny rented house. The living space is gradually squeezed, so is their life. They in course of time and events accept and accommodate the new life style.

VI

In the new setting Suranjan develops friendship with Haider, Kamal and Rabiul; he is also involved with Parveen. He questions communal barriers and states that Bengalis as a race must live together in perfect harmony. For him, 'the term Bengali should always be considered indivisible in character'. Therefore, the idea of labeling a particular group as outcasts in their own country is not acceptable to him. He proves thoroughly idealistic, rightly moulded in his father's ways. As a result, his fancy for Parveen or even Maya's involvement with Jehangir do never occasion the blowing storm. Rather the question is raised from the other side of the fence. Parveen's relations want

Suranjan to get converted before the marriage and when such a proposal does not stick, she is married elsewhere. Suranjan's innocent heart gets a shock and he starts realizing that his idealistic views may not find many takers in Bangladesh.

For Suranjan it is an instance of the demystification of the preceding ideal (illusion?). A glimpse into his psyche gives us the impression that he stands a divided self. He is shaped in the idealism of his father Sudhamoy, but the world he encounters is one bereft of any pattern whatsoever. The lip sympathy of friends, the stoicity of Kironmoyee (his mother) and also the obstinacy of Sudhamoy not to leave for India amidst all odds are gnawing him. The lover in him has acted as a safety valve and his earlier association with Parveen and the recent longing for Ratna conveniently deflects the tone of anger and disgust. But in both the cases he stands to lose and therefore his disenchantment deepens. More so, he finds his home in shambles, Maya being forcefully kidnapped (may be raped) and the 'not-me' turning against him in a seeming act of vengeance. Eventually, he is driven into a fury of mind-annihilating hatred and rushes headlong to destroy it. In order to propitiate his deep-seated anguish while earlier he escapes from the Dutta household, he now drinks with his friends without any hesitation (much against the norms of his grooming. He brings to his room Pinky alias Shamima, rapes her and opens rivulets of blood in her body. He rebels against the sordidness of a stunningly unequal system and whines for a meaningful change in the politico-religious social system. Taslima more often than not comments on the macro-dimensions of Suranjan's personalized war against the hypocrisy of the system he is in. His fight (most of the time intended, not, of course, materialized) for personal justice is rather an implicit crusade against social injustice. He functions in a socio-political void. The tender, gentle and loving Suranjan stands shocked behind his own rugged and sullen exterior, who swears by honour, duty and other positive values. He feels guilty after the rape and the remorse eats into his entrails. Seen in this context Suranjan's dilemma is a precondition, rather than a fall out. His insecurity is pitted against the security of Kamal. Claiming himself to be the 'son of the soil', he sets the question: "Why did he have to seek refuge in Kamal's home? Why did he have to run away from his home?" (p.1) But he fails to understand a fundamental equation: it is not any individual's ire against another, it is a typical case of genocide, a frenetic mob reacting against 'the other', that is not in any way concerned. In fact, our world has become too small a place and what happens anywhere has its fall

out every where. It is essentially an attempt created to play on the reader's innermost fears and insecurities.

VII

In fine, the pervading tone of resignation with occasional flashes of revolt captures our attention. The personal and political histories are artistically blended to explore the tenets of the socio-political cataclysm of our time. The canvass is too large, the stage crowed; the attempt to comprehend too much has led to a cramming of incidental details. The multiplicity blurs the main outlines; the historical record is scored at the expense of human story through Taslima's sweeping comprehension, architectonic power and sheer creative energy. She, frequently resorts to a lengthy description of incidents (at times the same incident is narrated often) to lend a tangy tenor to her treatise. But whenever she loosens the stranglehold of extraneous comment on her narrative, what emerges is some bright and insightful comments on the eccentric traditions that constitute fundamental components of the social structure in the subcontinent. Now the question is: should a writer enable his readers to escape from social and ethical responsibilities through 'catharsis' always? The arousal of concern is perhaps the prime objective (we should remember that the work is dedicated 'to the people of the Indian subcontinent). Here the work does not provide the readers with the escape route of *catharsis*, but forces them to a regime of reason. Taslima, however, finishes her mediation by asking rhetorically what indeed has been the point of crumbling social order, that we all live in. She also submits: 'Let Another Name for Religion be Humanism'.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. G. Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness*, New York, OUP., 1979, p. 176.
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3. J. Murphet, "Grounding Theory: Literary Theory and the New Geography" in *Post Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, Ed., Martin McQuillan *et al.*, Edinburgh, EUP., 1999, p. 201.
4. T. Nasrin, *Lajja* (Shame) tr. by Tutul Gupta, New Delhi, Penguin, 1994, p. 171 (All quotes in the essay are from this work).
5. T.I. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh: Beyond Subjection and Tyranny*, Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000, p. 180.