

Communalism and Communal Conflict in *A Suitable Boy* : An Analysis

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Abstract

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* presents us an engaging story of love, hate and transformation. The locale of the novel is the India in transformation in the early 1950s. The battle between the communal forces and secular forces occupies the central stage of the novel. Secularism seems to have a tough time having to struggle against the communal forces when the horror of the Partition is fresh in people's minds. It is because of this communal complexes that love is denied its fulfilment in the lover's union. It is because of this that intercommunal relations are losing its warmth- giving way to communal ideology and violence. This paper tries to analyse the problem of communalism that the novel is dealing with.

Keywords: *communalism, secularism, communal ideology, communal violence, love, hatred*

A Suitable Boy starts a few years after India's freedom from British colonial rule. The novel depicts social and political life in India in the early 1950s. Politics of and in the National Congress occupies an important space which casts its shadow on the lives of the characters in the novel in particular and the masses in general. Conflict between the conservative elements in the Congress represented by Purushottom Das Tandon and the liberal elements represented by Nehru forms the backdrop of the novel. Mr Mahesh Kapoor represents Nehruvian liberalism and Mr. Agarwal represents the conservative counterpart.

In the early 1950s Nehru found himself isolated in his own Congress party because of the conservative policies by the likes of Tandon. The scuffle between the conservative elements and liberals in Congress was not new then. Congress from the beginning realised the diversity of India and tried to accommodate all ideological forces within its fold. This realisation and accommodation sometimes invited criticism. Upadhyaya in his "The Politics of Indian Secularism" while discussing Congress policy of 'majoritarian secularism' notes that

...secularism was redefined in a uniquely Indian way. It was not taken to mean the separation of religion from politics, and the attenuation of community-based political identities. Instead, it took on board the British view of India as a communally compartmentalized society, but whereas the British chose to believe that India's communities could never work together as part of a single political

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system, Indian secularism promoted the ideal of cooperation and unity among India's 'communities'. (Upadhyaya)

Thus, Congress from time to time “attempted to contest or accommodate forces of the Hindu nationalist revival and Hindutva” (Gould 620). While conservatives like Tandon and Sampurnanand who were considered socialists in Congress took “a radical, often non-Gandhian approach to agitational politics and organization” (Gould 623). And on the other hand, the most influential socialist leader of the United Province, Jawaharlal Nehru, was condemning communal mobilization of all forms. Thus it is surprising to find such a combination of socialism and Hindu nationalism within the Congress.

Despite the considerable influence Nehru had all over India, Tandon was a force to reckon with. He was a socialist Hindu reformer who despite being in the Congress had a strong connection with such conservative religious organisations like the Arya Samaj. He was later on involved with militarized volunteer organisations like Hind Rakshak Dal which he endeavoured to build in the German model of Hitler. There was another Congress colleague of Tandon, Sampurnanand, who also followed the same conservative politics. Sampurnanand developed a unique theory of secularism combining theories of socialism and Hinduism “which defended religion as a vital human pursuit” and considered that “Irreligion, and ridicule of religious faith are perhaps among the greatest enemies of true secularism” (Gould 636). Both of them were vocal socialists, but interestingly both of them pursued conservative politics championing Hindi and opposing Urdu just for the sake of its being primarily spoken by Muslims.

Their anti-Urdu stance was responsible for the growing communalisation in the United Province in the 1930s and 1940s whose political advantage was taken by the Muslim League. Sampurnanand, who was the Minister of education in UP, considered Urdu to be “‘unacceptable’ and certainly ‘not... suitable for adoption as a national language’” (Gould 639). In the novel, *A Suitable Boy*, we find that Mr. Agarwal, representing Tandon, is reluctant in giving Urdu any official status.

The Nehru-Tandon conflict at the Centre finds a provincial correlative in the novel in the characters of Mahesh Kapoor and Mr. Agarwal, the former representing Nehru and his ideals and the latter Tandon's. In the novel's Purva Pradesh, Mr Agarwal who is the Home Minister is notorious for his hostility towards the Muslims and also towards the Secularists and Leftists as they speak against such hostility. About his approach towards the Muslims the Chief Minister himself says

with annoyance “Agarwal’s attitude to the Muslims is well known” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 1109).

In the novel, we are introduced to this rift within the Congress between Tandon and Nehru through an old teacher who advises Mahesh Kapoor to leave the Congress. He thinks that Mr. Kapoor should leave the Congress and form a new party. He is inclined to such thinking because he finds the Congress party has become dominated by peoples who are greedy and evil. He says to Mr Kapoor:

“Everyone knows how unhappy he is about Tandonji becoming the Congress President through questionable means. Everyone knows that Panditji has almost lost his grip on his own party. Everyone knows that he respects you...” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 367).

The communal tension and clash between Hindus and Muslims regarding the construction of a temple in the immediate west of a disputed mosque alarms Mr Kapoor and compels him to think how these communities will live together. Unlike persons like Tandon, he views the problem with an eye towards solving this communal problem rather than aggravating the communal fault line. He seems to understand the root of the problem when he says:

“The basic problem for me personally is not the temple or the mosque. The basic problem is how the two religions will get on with each other in Brahmipur” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 369).

He feels that “there is mistrust” among these two communities and he is well aware that the real question is “how to overcome it” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 369). He then elaborates in some length the communal antipathy in the national politics which is one of the reasons why the communal problem is difficult to mitigate:

“The rank and file of Congress opposes old Muslim Leaguers who wish to join Congress. Well, this is only to be expected. But Congress has had a long tradition of Hindu-Muslim collaboration, and, believe me, it is the obvious party to join” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 369).

Liberals who were associated with Nehru and shared his secular ideal quitted the Congress in droves and formed parties like Peasants’ and Workers’ Peoples’ Party (KMPP). Nehru was for protecting rights of the minority Muslims in India. He was strictly against propaganda against the minority Muslims which he found Pakistan was indulged in. In India, too, there were some Hindu-Rights like the Hindu Mahasabha who were indulged in the propaganda against the Minorities like there was in Pakistan. Nehru believed this propaganda of the majority will give birth to communalism of the majority. He knew that it was possible that many Muslims in India

would also indulge in such activities like the Mahasabha but he considered the communalism of the majority to be a larger threat and he was more robust against his opposition to the majority communalism than to minority one. In the novel, in a letter addressed to the Chief Minister of Purva Pradesh, Mr SS Sharma Nehru expresses his views about minority Muslim communalism:

. . . Sometimes it is said that there might be bad elements among the Muslims who might give trouble. That is quite possible, but I think it highly unlikely that any major trouble will come from that direction. We should be careful of course in regard to strategic areas or vital spots. (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 1108)

He was from the beginning even before India's Independence – he expresses this opinion in his *Autobiography*– considered Muslim communalism to be reactionary in nature and arising out of fear while the Hindu majority communalism to be the greater threat. In the letter addressed to S S Sharma Nehru writes:

I think it is much more likely that trouble may come from Hindu or Sikh communal elements. They would like to take advantage of the occasion to misbehave towards Muslims. If any such thing occurs, it will have very bad consequences and will weaken us. Therefore, this kind of thing must not be allowed to happen. This is of major importance and we must give full protection to our minorities. This means also that we must not permit any propaganda on the part of Hindu or Sikh communal organisations, which is on a par with Pakistan propaganda on the other side. (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 1108)

4. Communalism in *A Suitable Boy*

The novel shows a dark cloud of communalism is gradually forming in the sky of Purva Pradesh, a microcosm of India. The novel elaborates a number of dimensions this problem of communalism finds its way into society and politics. This problem is introduced largely through the character of the Raja of Marh, Mr Tandon, the Home Minister of PP and through mundane conversation between characters. The novel includes among its prominent communal characters Mr Tandon, the Home Minister of Purva Pradesh and the Raja of Marh and among its prominent secular characters the Nawab of Baitar and Mr Kapoor, the Minister of Revenue.

L N Agarwal: the Communal Home Minister

Mr Agarwal is the Home Minister of Purva Pradesh. Vikram Seth portrays the his character in opposition to the character of Mr. Mahesh Kapoor and the ideal of secularism which he upholds.

Mr Kapoor is a strong votary of communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. On the other hand Mr Agarwal is vengeful towards the Muslims, the reason behind which is not made clear. This has earned him a good name among the Hindu communalists in the Congress and a bad name among the Seculars and Muslims. However, similarly unexplained is his strong action against Hindu communalism towards the end of the novel Mr Tandon, when he becomes the Chief Minister. He warns the Raja of Marh, a Raja having a sick communal mentality, against indulging in any salvaging activity regarding the Shiva *linga* and thereby inciting the communal tension. This, when juxtaposed with his earlier discourses and activities having a clear communal overtone complicates his character.

But barring this solitary pro-secular approach, he is a Hindu communal leader in the novel. The novel gives an account how the Muslim masses hold him to be ‘prime object of hatred’:

As the tea, paan and newspaper went around, the conversation turned to politics at the state level, especially the recent communal troubles in Brahmipur. The prime object of hatred was the Home Minister, L.N. Agarwal, whose defense of the police firing on the Muslim mob near the Alamgiri Masjid had been widely reported in the newspapers.... (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 702)

The masses have devised ‘rhymed slogans’ which became very popular among Muslims in Brahmipur as well as in Salimpur where Maan visited when he went to Rasheed’s home in Rudhia District. The crowd in Salimpur chants with relish the following slogan:

Saanp ka zahar, insaan ki khaal:

Yeh hai L.N. Agarwal!

The poison of a snake, the skin of a man:

This is L.N. Agarwal!

Ghar ko loot kar kha gaya maal:

Home Minister Agarwal!

He robbed our Home, and devoured our substance:

Home Minister Agarwal! (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 702)

Not only these, but the novel includes instances where the Home Minister directly expresses his disgust and hatred for Muslims. We are introduced to such an instance when Mr Agarwal remarks about the Muslims following the conflict in the Misri Mandi where the Rai Bahadur

said twenty Muslims died in police firing. Mr Agarwal replies to the Rai Bahadur:

Mere Muslims threatening us from inside the country or across the border we can deal with. If Nehru were not so soft-hearted we would have dealt with them properly a few years ago. (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 272)

L. N. Agarwal shows his true communal colour when he is thoroughly humiliated in the State Assembly by Begun Abida Khan and others. He thinks about the Muslims:

They were all fanatics, these Muslims, who appeared not to realize they were here in this country on sufferance. A calm dose of well-applied law would do them good. (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 286)

In the Assembly the Muslims are speaking for Muslims and Scheduled Castes speaking for SCs. There is no one crossing the caste or religious line and speaking for others. Abida Khan from Democratic Party being a Muslim speaking for the Muslims and criticizing the Congress Home Minister's careless action which can be interpreted as communally motivated. On the other hand, Congress MLA Abdus Salam being a Muslim is attacking the same Home Minister, hence his own party because he argues that the Muslims have been victimised. Abdus Salam is asking a pertinent question which the Home Minister is dreading:

‘What I have been wondering about during the course of this discussion is, well, why was a deterrent police force—well, maybe just an adequate police force—not maintained at the site of the temple? Then there would have been no need to fire in this panicky manner.’ (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 287)

But the Home Minister, because of his hatred for the Muslims and seculars considered this “a plot by Muslims and so-called secular Hindus to attack him”. He concluded that “his own party had been infected with treason” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 287). However, as the novel says, despite the Home Minister's hatred for Muslims, the killing of the Muslims at the Chowk was not because of his hatred for Muslims but because of his partisan attitude for the members of the business community who funded his election campaigns.

He and his ilk are full of resentment for Nehru, who was taunted by some of them as being “almost an honorary Muslim” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 335) for his stance towards the Muslims in India after partition. They regret “Now that Sardar Patel is dead, no one can control Panditji”. And L N Agarwal replies hopelessly “Even before Patel died who would Nehru listen to?...Except, of course, his great Muslim friend—Maulana Azad” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 293).

When some MLA blurts out that Nehru ‘means well’ he pours out his mind:

‘Means well—means well—’ sighed L.N. Agarwal. ‘He meant well when he gave away Pakistan. He meant well when he gave away half of Kashmir. If it hadn’t been for Patel, we wouldn’t even have the country that we do. Jawaharlal Nehru has built up his entire career by meaning well. Gandhiji loved him because he meant well. And the poor, stupid people love him because he means well. God save us from people who mean well. (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 293)

The Communal Raja

The novelist includes the character of Raja of Marh who, because of his obsession with hatred against the Muslims, sometimes borders on lunacy. The Raja has a questionable moral character and furious temper. He feels that centuries of Muslim rule has tortured and humiliated Hindus. He is now determined to take revenge and undo the historical change that the Muslim rule has brought about. Because of his actions he is described to be a “Muslim-baiting Raja” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 377).

He is haunted by his paranoia of Muslim conspiracy against him. When he and the Nawab of Baitar were discussing how to circumnavigate the new Zamindari Abolition Act, they were discovered by the Minister of Revenue, Nawab’s friend Mahesh Kapoor. He felt that the discovery was owing to a plan by the Nawab to humiliate him, though there was no such plan. The Nawab was more uncomfortable than the Raja since the Minister was his friend. Although the Raja was one of the sources of Hindu-Muslim communal conflict because of his plan of construction of the Shiva-temple, the Nawab swallowed his anger and considered meeting with the Raja with the hope that they could arrive at a solution for the Act.

This Raja of Marh planned to build a temple in the immediate west of a mosque called Alamghiri mosque because of its connection with the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. It was believed that the mosque was build by the order of the Mughal emperor upon the ruin of a temple dedicated to the god Shiva. About this mission of building a Shiva temple at the immediate side of a mosque the novelist comments:

He had come to lay the foundation of the Shiva temple, his latest venture, in the centre of the old town. The temple was to stand cheek by jowl with the grand mosque constructed by order of the Emperor Aurangzeb two and a half centuries ago on the ruins of an earlier temple

to Shiva. If the Raja of Marh had had his way, the foundation of his temple would have stood on the rubble of the mosque itself. (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 134)

The act of building a temple at that spot carries two messages from the Raja. One, that the Hindus were humiliated throughout the centuries by the Muslims and numerous temples were destroyed so he wants to create a temple at the immediate vicinity of the temple to assert that now the power is at the hands of Hindus and now they can build temples near the vicinity of a ruined one, if not on the ruin itself where a mosque stands now. And the second is that, the location of the temple at the immediate west of the mosque will force Muslims to bow five times a day towards the temple which will be humiliating the Muslims.

Though the Maharaja is a great hater of Muslims he once expressed his violent desire to marry Saeeda Bai even though the latter made it clear that she would not change her religion to become a Hindu after marriage. In order to highlight the hatred for Muslims or the Muslim rule in India the novelist mentions the rage of the Maharaja at the slightest mention of Muslim architecture which reminds one of the past Muslim rule. Saeeda Bai received a book entitled *The Poetical Works of Ghalib. An Album of Pictures by Chughtai* from one of her admirers named Maan. The book contained a group of beautiful Persian style illustrations. Among these there was an image of people at prayer and a mosque. When Saeeda Bai showed the Maharaja the above illustration she found him reacting in the following way:

the sunset, the white dome and minaret of the mosque—' It was the wrong word to use. With a guttural grunt of rage, the Raja of Marh ripped out the page she was showing him. Saeeda Bai stared at him, petrified. (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 140)

4.1: Aurangzeb and Religious History

This problem introduces us to another contested historical question of the last Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. The novel contains some references to the popular image of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb as being the destroyer of temples. The town of Brahmipur has a historical monument which the author describes as "the beautiful and austere Alamgiri Mosque, ordered by the Emperor Aurangzeb to be built in the heart of the city upon the ruins of a great temple" (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 222). The orthodox Hindu citizens of Brahmipur, even after 250 years elapsed share their "loathing for a man who had dared to destroy one of the holiest temples of

the great destroyer Shiva himself” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 222).

The novelist does not hesitate to call those who try to picture the other side of Aurangzeb which has been gradually pushed towards oblivion as “apologists for Aurangzeb” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 222). While talking about the long history of communal riot in Brahmipur and poll-tax on unbelievers which in the novelist’s account seems acts of vengeance by Aurangzeb on the unbelievers, he comments:

But the razing of temples usually required some extraordinary impetus, such as the indication that it was being used as a centre for armed or political resistance. Apologists for Aurangzeb were apt to claim that he had a worse reputation for intolerance than he deserved and that he was as harsh with Shias as he was with Hindus. (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 222)

The temple in question is surrounded by many myths and rumours which convey to us the significance it has among Hindus in Brahmipur. The Shiva-linga itself was “rumoured to have been preserved by the priests of the so-called Chandrachur Temple on the night before it was reduced to rubble” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 222). The huge stone was then mysteriously carried to the cremation ground near the Ganga. It is believed that the “knowledge of its location was secretly maintained and passed on for more than ten generations from head-priest to head-priest in hereditary succession” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 222). Lest the Muslim attack again there was not any attempt to rebuild the temple. Only after Independence and partition of the country “the priest of the long-since-destroyed Chandrachur Temple—who lived in poverty in a shack near the cremation ghat—felt that it was safe to emerge and identify himself” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 223). The priest tried to rebuild the temple but the veracity of the existence of the temple was challenged by Archaeological Survey of India and all the priest’s efforts were of no avail.

In the words of Kedarnath, a person who suffered the worst of partition and still possesses an ‘evenhandedness’ of judgement the construction of the temple on the immediate west of the mosque is an act of lunacy by the Raja. He gives a dispassionate account of the history of the temple and the mosque:

Some local pujari located a Shiva-linga in the Ganga,’ said Kedarnath. ‘It is supposed to have come from the Chandrachur Temple, the great Shiva temple that they say Aurangzeb destroyed. The pillars of the mosque do have

bits of Hindu carving, so it must have been made out of some ruined temple, God knows how long ago” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 223).

Then he goes on to pass his own judgement on the act of the Raja who is going to build a new Chandrachur Temple towards the immediate west of the mosque so that Muslims may five times in a day bow their heads before his temple:

He’s a real lunatic. Since he can’t destroy the mosque and build on the original site, he’s decided to build to the immediate west and install the linga in the sanctum there. For him it’s a great joke to think that the Muslims will be bowing down in the direction of his Shiva-linga five times a day (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 223-4).

For Kedarnath the activity of the Raja is like taking delight by “a supposedly gentle, spiritual people” in “rubbing other people’s noses in dog-shit”. He thinks that

Certainly I cannot understand people like the Raja of Marh. He imagines himself to be a new Ganesh whose divine mission in life is to lead the armies of Shiva to victory over the demons. And yet he’s besotted with half the Muslim courtesans of the city (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 224).

The Shiva Temple

The Shiva-temple to be built immediately west to the mosque plays an important part in defining the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims. Among the Hindus, there are some like the Raja of Marh who want to reconstruct the temple on the immediate west of the mosque so that the Muslims have to pray with their heads bending before the temple. They do not bother if people die in the name of the construction of the temple. On the other hand, there are characters like Kedarnath, even though a victim of the Partition, who opposes the construction. For him it’s a madness. Perhaps, being a Partition-riot victim he is in a better position to understand the evils of communal violence.

For the Muslim masses the construction of the temple is not a welcome event and naturally they greet the temple with hostility. This construction triggers a passionate march by the Muslim masses of the area towards the temple under construction in protest at what they believe to be a deliberate defilement of the sanctity of the mosque surrounding area. Eventually a number of Muslims are killed as the insufficient Police force deployed surrounding the temple start firing in

panic at the march. The novel does not shed much light on how the Hindu masses react to the construction or the eventual protest. On the other hand there is no doubt that the Muslim masses feel infuriated. Thus this construction business deepens the communal divide.

Thus there is a battle going on within the Hindu community- one for construction of the temple and taking revenge on history and on Muslims, and the other for forgetting the evils and making a new beginning with the help of technology after the Independence. The following is an extract which shows the battle that is raging on within the community. Haresh who along with Kedarnath share the latter sentiment disapprove of the construction of the Shiva-Temple and addresses the temple as ‘Damned Shiva-temple’. He is retorted by Sunil, a historian:

‘Don’t call it a damned Shiva Temple,’ said the historian.

‘It is a damned Shiva Temple, it’s caused enough deaths already.’

‘You’re a Hindu, and you call it a damned temple—you should look at yourself in the mirror. The British have left, in case you need reminding, so don’t put on their airs. Damned temple, damned natives—.’ (Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 245)

Throughout the novel this animosity between these two communities waxes and wanes. It never escalates into unchecked violence, except once when during the procession of Muharram and Bharat Milaap, the emotionally charged mobs do not heed to the trifle requests of one another and end up butchering each other. The event does not occupy a significant space in the novel and it in itself does not have great magnitude. However, the effect of the event lingers throughout the novel and it marks a turning point after which the communal events and characters weighs heavy on the secular counterparts.

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