

**Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema**  
**Prof. Sarbani Banerjee**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee**

**Lecture - 49**  
**Displaced People, Abandoned Homes - IV**



Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema. So, we are talking about the Displaced People and Abandoned Homes. For today's lecture, we are mainly going to discuss a work, a TV series by Govind Nihalani called Tamas. It is based on a novel by Bhisham Sahni.

So, Tamas is a television series that was aired for the first time in 1987 and it was made by Govind Nihalani. It showcases the trauma of violence and of being uprooted from one's native place. It very elaborately and very successfully portrays the personal pain and sense of loss of the refugees.

So, as the title suggests, Tamas or Darkness, the movie gets into the origin or the root of hatred, which led to the cracking of the subcontinent and how quickly this hatred, this venom spreads and traps the human consciousness. And you know from there on, there is no point of reconciliation, there is no point of going back and reconciling between the different communities - the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs. (Refer Slide Time: 02:00)

### Tamas (1987)

- Tamas (1987), a television series by Govind Nihalani, showcases the **trauma of violence, personal pain, loss, uprooting of one's native place.**
- The movie gets into the genesis of hatred which had led to the Partition, and how quickly it traps the human into the darkness.
- Bhisham Sahni is a grieved spectator as well as the filmmaker.
- Sahni frames the insuperable conditions and shapes the characters in a way that there is only a thin line separating the victim from the aggressor. Human dilemma and crises are delineated in great details.
- The film draws a vivid picture of the **animosity torn Punjab** and makes the audience go through the trial by way of experiencing the artwork.

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So, Bhasham Sahni the author of the original novel is a grieved spectator as well as the filmmaker. So, Sahni frames the insuperable conditions, the conditions which different communities could not outgrow, could not overcome in favor of humanitarian considerations.

And so, we see that the characters are very nuanced in this film, there is hardly a difference or hardly a separating line, a fault line that separates the victim from the aggressor, the friend from the foe. So, at one point, people.. two individuals from different communities are friends and then at another, they are arch rivals. So, human dilemma and crisis are delineated in great details in Nihalani's television series, Tamas.

So, Tamas is about a fall of human conscience, a fall or a kind of a failure of a society from which individuals or different social groups fail, from which individuals or different social groups cannot emerge, cannot resurface into normalcy, cannot resurface and resume their normalcy.

So, they have to break away, they have to geographically announce themselves as separate nation states. So, the film specifically draws on the vivid picture of the animosity-torn Punjab. The audience also goes through the process of trial while experiencing the artwork, while watching Tamas.

So, it is set against the backdrop of a Muslim majority Punjab, which could be presumably in Rawalpindi. So, we see the opening scene is with the Congress party members taking out a prabhat pheri. They are promulgating the need and beauty of a humanity, of unity among different groups, among different communities.

They are trying to promulgate certain lofty ideas through singing patriotic songs and chanting Vande Mataram and so on; obviously, the Muslim League poses an opposition to this. The members from Muslim League come and try to stop the Prabhat Pheri or the morning procession. So, in this you know already tense situation, we see a Dalit Sikh individual, the character called Nathu, who is a Dalit tanner who hides animals and that is how he makes his living; and Nathu is forced to murder a pig. (Refer Slide Time: 05:24)

## Tamas (1987)

- Tamas is set against the backdrop of a Muslim-majority region of Punjab, presumably somewhere near Rawalpindi.
- The series starts with the **Congress party** promulgating the need and beauty of harmony.
- **Muslim League** members stop the *prabhat pheri* (morning procession).
- The character **Nathu** is a Dalit tanner who is forced to murder a swine and deliver it as part of an agreement, for five rupees. Nathu is told that the pig will be used for clinical purpose.
- The dead pig appears at the doorstep of the town mosque the next day (Swine is *haram* according to Islam).
- Following this incident, the town witnesses a gore, filth, and hate-ridden misfortune.

He is forced to murder a pig and deliver it as part of an agreement in exchange for which he is paid 5 rupees. 5 rupees is a considerable amount at the time when the film is being, you know, depicted in the pre-partition times. 5 rupees is a big sum and so Nathu is actually told by this influential man, this man who employs him to kill the pig hails from an upper-caste, upper-class...he holds some socio-political clout and he tells Nathu that this pig will be used for laboratory purpose, it will be used for clinical purpose.

And yet, we see that very next day in the morning the dead pig appears at the doorstep of a mosque. And this leads to, this escalates and catalyzes a riot, from which there is no coming back. This is because the Muslims have it generally among themselves.... According to the Islamic faith, a swine is considered as haram or impure. So, after this incident the town witnesses a filthy exchange of hatred, human killings, massacre, incendiaries.

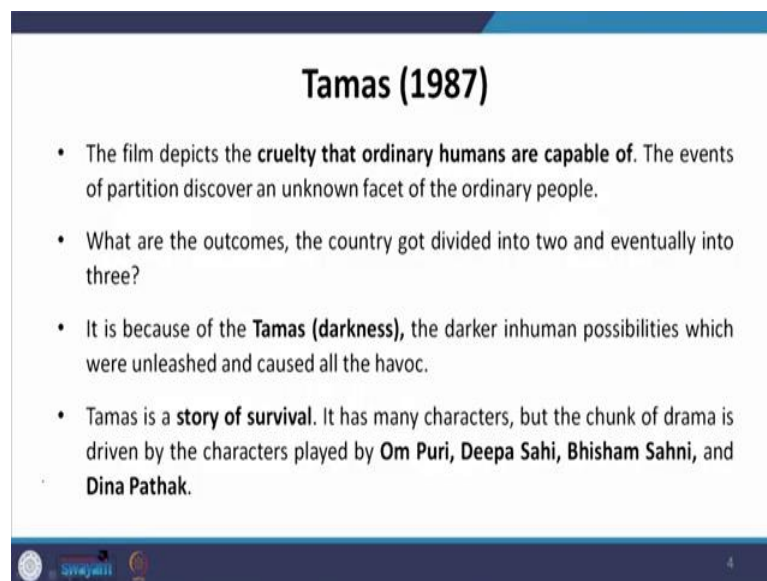
So, loss of lives and property follow because of this intentional inhuman act. An act that wanted to provoke communal strife. So, this is a classic example which takes us back to what we were discussing, what we have been discussing in several of our lectures before, which is that the riots... by now critics have, critics and scholars have established that riots were not spontaneous. In many cases they were pogroms, there was the a lot of money, a lot of pre-planning and scheming went into the making of these pogroms.

So, they were organized like any other rallies, and they would be spearheaded, they would be spearheaded by prominent political leaders. This is the case in Tamas, that we

see. So, the film depicts it... the film depicts successfully what ordinary humans are capable of.

In Cracking India, we saw the figure of godmother. A woman that is anti-war, who is pacifist and who is yet.. who is so strong, who heals people around, who afterwards helped in saving aya from the brothel where she was sold. So, she makes such a positive contribution, she is a very positive presence amid the larger dismal reality of partition. In contrast to that, we see here the amount of cruelty that ordinary humans are capable of.

So, partition or a crisis, a cataclysm such as partition actually discovered so many different facets of people that were not known. So, it is because of this Tamas the darkness inside that people are actually pushed to a hellish fire, they are pushing themselves and the society into a hellish fire. (Refer Slide Time: 09:27)



### Tamas (1987)

- The film depicts the **cruelty that ordinary humans are capable of**. The events of partition discover an unknown facet of the ordinary people.
- What are the outcomes, the country got divided into two and eventually into three?
- It is because of the **Tamas (darkness)**, the darker inhuman possibilities which were unleashed and caused all the havoc.
- Tamas is a **story of survival**. It has many characters, but the chunk of drama is driven by the characters played by **Om Puri, Deepa Sahi, Bhisham Sahni, and Dina Pathak**.

It refers to the darker inhuman possibilities lurking within an individual and which were unleashed during the time of this crisis, and it caused much havoc. Tamas is also a story of survival, we in the later part of the narration.. we see the plight of the refugees, when they have to evacuate their homes and travel to what would become India.

So the conflict that comes out of oblivion.. the strife, the tiff, intercommunal rivalry, the riot that is sparked out of nowhere and is something that prevails throughout the plot of Tamas. And the terror actually... a reign of terror predominates and it eclipses all the

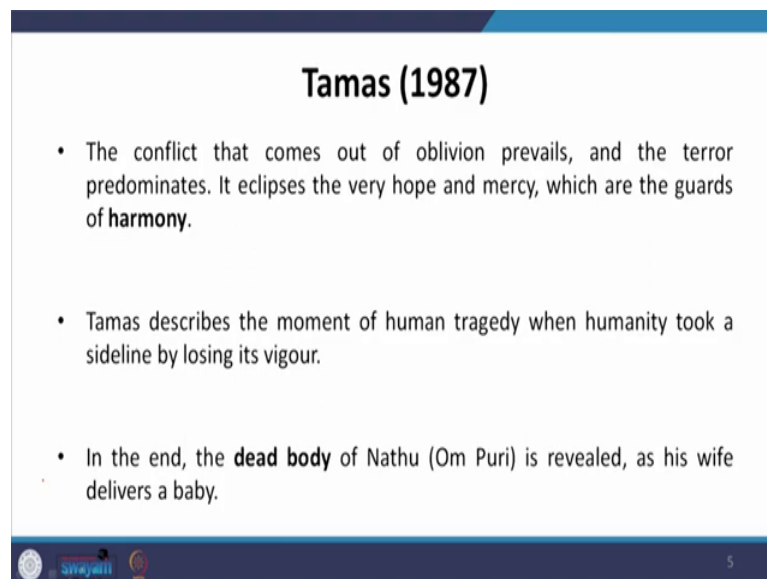
hope and a sense of mercy, a sense of humanity or sense of a syncretic society and togetherness, which could have safeguarded harmony and peace.

So, there is a point in Tamas where a woman is having a very ordinary conversation with a tailor, the woman is a Sikh and the tailor is a Muslim; and from the conversation, the audience realizes that she has been sewing her clothes, she has been ordering her clothes to this man for a long time now.

So, she is an old customer, she wants her you know... she wants some wedding clothes to be stitched by this man, when the riots suddenly escalate. The town bell starts ringing and the an ordinary man, a poor man such as the tailor you know, he is afraid, he can guess what is going to come next, he can imagine the consequences and so he is terrified.




The society is not going to be this same anymore, and we see likewise that the greatest loss, the greatest losses are incurred by ordinary people regardless of their communities, such as this tailor or the sweep shop owner whose utensils are suddenly stolen; and when he tries to prevent that, when he tries to question he is hit, he is injured.

So, ordinary people that are making their living through small businesses, small enterprises, they suffer. Although they are not at the heart of it, they are not enactors and they are not the architects of these hateful riots or communal strifes. (Refer Slide Time: 12:48)



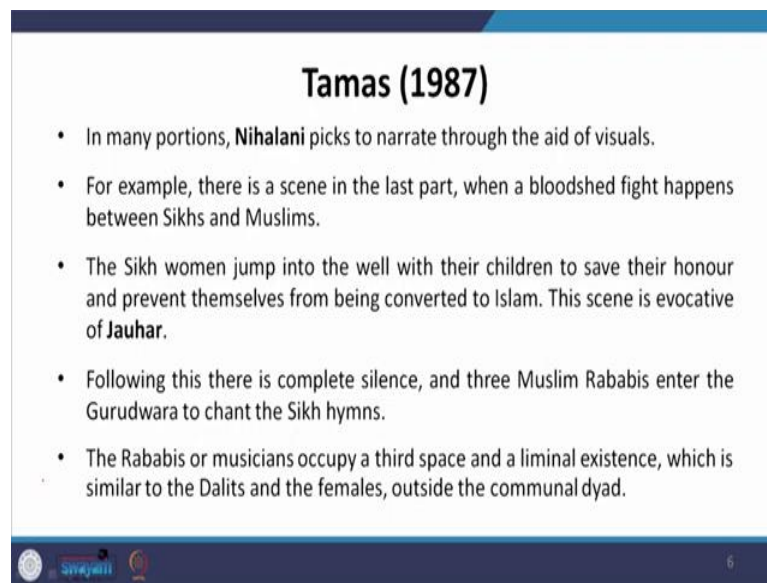
### Tamas (1987)

- The conflict that comes out of oblivion prevails, and the terror predominates. It eclipses the very hope and mercy, which are the guards of **harmony**.
- Tamas describes the moment of human tragedy when humanity took a sideline by losing its vigour.
- In the end, the **dead body** of Nathu (Om Puri) is revealed, as his wife delivers a baby.

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So, it is a human tragedy and humanity takes a sideline and loses its vigor. In the end, the body of Nathu played by Om Puri is revealed as his wife gives a birth to their baby.

So, we see that there is a scene... so Govind Nihalani picks to narrate through the era. We see that there is a scene, where there is a bloodshed, fight between the Sikhs and the Muslims presumably. The Sikhs are defeated and so in order to save their honor, the Sikh women jump into the well along with their children so that they are not converted to Islam. (Refer Slide Time: 13:36)



### Tamas (1987)

- In many portions, **Nihalani** picks to narrate through the aid of visuals.
- For example, there is a scene in the last part, when a bloodshed fight happens between Sikhs and Muslims.
- The Sikh women jump into the well with their children to save their honour and prevent themselves from being converted to Islam. This scene is evocative of **Jauhar**.
- Following this there is complete silence, and three Muslim Rababis enter the Gurudwara to chant the Sikh hymns.
- The Rababis or musicians occupy a third space and a liminal existence, which is similar to the Dalits and the females, outside the communal dyad.

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And this scene itself is evocative of Jauhar. Feminist critics have studied this scene as remarkable; this scene actually evoked and it attracted or it sparked a lot of sentimentality, because it is infused with so much of emotion, especially among the Sikh population in India when Tamas was made. This scene actually evoked a lot of sentimentality.

For example, it reminded of the case, the real incident of Thoa Khalsa village, where in actuality several women.. almost a little less than 90 women had thrown themselves into wells, into wells along with their children. Women from different ages so that they are not converted to Islam, and in order to save, in order to save their Sikhi.

So, these women were actually treated with some kind of a holy aura and their act was seen as sacrosanct. Act was seen as sacrosanct, these women were even social activists, like Rameshwari Nehru would say, that their names would be written in history, in golden letters for their brave act of not letting their honor be taken right.

And we see this film also reminds us of what Gyanendra Pandey is saying, that partition happens in ordinary times, partition or you know the division, the sense of communal division is available in our language, it is semantically available in our mundane ordinary circumstances. And we see that as people are preparing to you know divide the country and that becomes inevitable, it is.. the decision is available in terms of language, the way the community leaders speak.

So, the Muslim leader actually quotes the holy Qu'ran, he is talking about the Prophet and his different exploits and how he was guided by the Allah, how he was guided by Allah. And so, the language is not coinciding with the current contemporary social-spatial reality, it is actually inspired from one's respective cultural repository. So, people have started drawing on their mytho-cultural sources.

So, people start talking about, the Muslims start talking about Qu'ran and the Muslim leader inspires the ordinary illiterate people and thereby this enables them to legitimize, to justify what they are doing, that is committing violence or trying to, you know, dismember the subcontinent.

So, it is in a way a kind of gruesome act; gruesome acts are sanctioned when they have the halo of or when they have the backing, the support from mythologies, from sources

that are adored, that are revered by an entire community. In the same way, we see among the Hindus the young school boy suddenly stop talking normally, they call themselves as characters from Mahabharata.

So, the leader becomes Arjun suddenly and so they start seeing the immediate society as a battleground of Kurukshetra, and so they are.. so the Hindus are essentially on the 'good' side, they are the Pandavas and the Muslims are the 'evils', they are the Kauravs, they need to be decimated, they need to be killed.

So, people.. suddenly the language changes among the Sikhs. There is a significant, you know, reference/ solution being made to the prowess and the militancy, the legacy of the different gurus, how they have been able to safeguard the community from the attacks, several attacks of the Muslims.

And so, the gurus are being evoked and, you know, revered inside the Gurudwara. The militant language passes from the males to the females; there is a point before the Jauhar. Before taking of... before mass suicide by the women, the female leader starts singing the song that the men, the Sikh males were singing all along.

Once you realize that their male kin are dying in the battle and the women would be soon attacked, they start singing a song which celebrates militancy, celebrates warfare -- something that women are normally not akin to, not involved in. There is a sentence - "Purza purza kat mare...". So, we might be cut into pieces, but not run away from the battlefield; that is our Sikhi.

So, we see that aggression is a kind of whirlpool that sucks everyone in, and ultimately everyone is a part of these different poles. No one is neutral or no one is outside of aggressive you know attitude. However, we see a third space also, the space for example, the space inhabited by the Muslim Rababis or the singers. They are part of the Islamic community.

However, they sing in the Gurudwara; they are traditional musicians and they have lost their job because of this Muslim-Sikh strife, and so they would normally, in normal times they would chant Sikh hymns inside the Gurudwara. And after everyone is dead, the Rababis enter the Gurudwara amid a eerie, uncanny silence. They mark the liminal



existence which is similar to the Dalits, basically the Dalit and the female who are outside of such communal dyads. (Refer Slide Time: 21:02)

The slide is titled "Tamas (1987)" and contains three bullet points. The first bullet point discusses the issue of dislocation and displacement. The second bullet point discusses the pain and trauma of being labeled as refugees. The third bullet point provides statistics from Penderai Moon regarding refugees in March 1948. The slide footer includes a logo and the number 7.

### Tamas (1987)

- The issue of **dislocation and displacement** is an essential aspect which has wider connotation than merely geographical.
- Moreover, apart from economic misery and physical abuse, the pain and trauma of being labelled as refugees in their own homeland are some other aspects which have been deeply probed recently in the histories of memories.
- **Penderai Moon** - by March 1948, four and half million Hindus and six million Muslims had become refugees.

And so, we see that dislocation and displacement becomes an essential aspect depicted in Tamas. So, apart from economic misery and physical abuse, one has to deal with the pain and trauma of being labeled as a refugee in their own homeland. Someone who is in exile and who belongs to nowhere, and Penderai Moon in this regard gives us statistics that by March 1948, 4 and a half million Hindus and 6 million Muslims had become refugees. (Refer Slide Time: 21:37)

The slide is titled "Tamas (1987)" and contains three bullet points. The first bullet point discusses the helplessness and inertness of the administrative and political establishment. The second bullet point discusses the vacuum and confusion created after the change of the political baton. The third bullet point discusses the disruptive elements during the time of chaos. The slide footer includes a logo and the number 8.

### Tamas (1987)

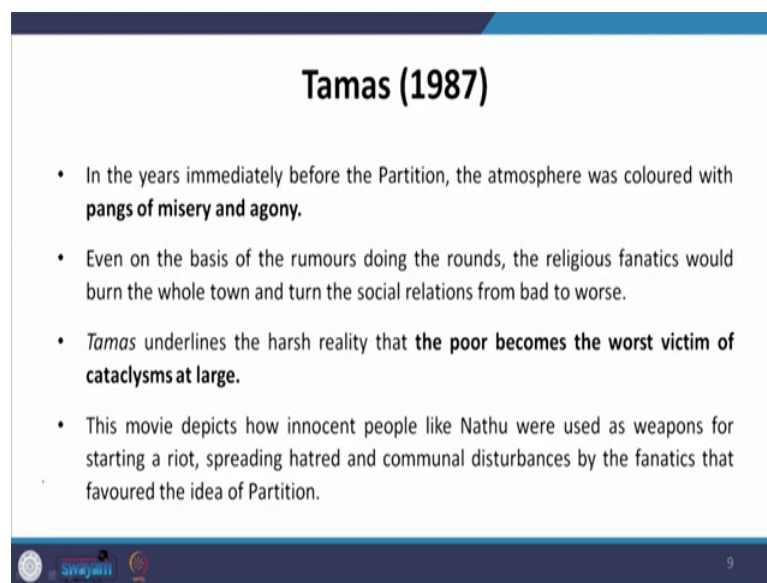
- The film **portrays the helplessness and inertness of the administrative and political establishment** in dealing with the riots and consequent chaotic situations.
- It exhibits the **vacuum and confusion** created after the change of the political baton, which resulted in **anarchy and a complete breakdown of the law and order of the state**. The chaos were tacitly promoted by the British rulers, then on back foot, as they had nothing more to gain from India.
- During the time of chaos, the disruptive elements mocked the law-and-order machinery. At places, protectors of law and order collaborated with the anti-social elements in committing heinous crimes.

So, we see the figure of the administrator, the British administrator Richard who is the Deputy Magistrate and he actually does nothing. The British, the colonizers are on their

backfoot, they realize that they are no longer stakeholders in an Indian society, in an Indian polity. And so, they let the riots happen, they do not warn the people till it is too late and so in a way indirectly Richard, the character of Richard here is responsible for the amplification, for the further worsening of conditions due to the riots.

So, we see a complete breakdown of law and order, people trying to take law in their own hands, and so there is a kind of vacuum and confusion as the political pattern is going to change. So, these chaos were tacitly being supported and promoted and let to happen by the British rulers because they realized they had nothing to gain from the Indian society anymore.

So, the disruptive elements mocked the law and order machinery, they took law in their own hands, the protectors of law and order collaborated with the anti-social elements and they were creating, they were committing heinous crimes. (Refer Slide Time: 23:26)



**Tamas (1987)**

- In the years immediately before the Partition, the atmosphere was coloured with **pangs of misery and agony.**
- Even on the basis of the rumours doing the rounds, the religious fanatics would burn the whole town and turn the social relations from bad to worse.
- *Tamas* underlines the harsh reality that **the poor becomes the worst victim of cataclysms at large.**
- This movie depicts how innocent people like Nathu were used as weapons for starting a riot, spreading hatred and communal disturbances by the fanatics that favoured the idea of Partition.

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We also see the figure of the teacher as a part of the third space. We were talking of the third space here.

A Muslim you know teacher, who has translated works of Kalidasa into Urdu. And it is a great contribution; a literary piece available in translation, actually supports, it facilitates its survival, its process of you know recognition to a larger audience. So, we see that this scholar, this Muslim scholar is actually doing a great contribution to a Sanskrit writer, a great writer such as Kalidasa.

But during the riots, his books, all his works, the innumerable works that he has you know produced tirelessly are destroyed, they are burned. So, we see that the point where such works, works originally in Sanskrit that are translated to Urdu, works that testify to a syncretic society are burned. It refers to denying you know... it symbolizes denying so many years of history, so many years that Muslims and Hindus have lived together.

These are the such a work, as shown in Tamas, could have been you know a token of Hindu-Muslim harmony. And I mean something that resulted in great productivity, rich scholarly you know contributions and everything was razed. So, we get to understand the nature of the trouble-makers, the hotheads in the society. They have no value for scholarly work, for books. They burn books, right.

So, we see that on the basis of rumors making rounds, religious fanatics would burn entire towns and social relations would go from bad to worse. So, and poors of course, as signified through the character of Nathu, they become the worst victim of cataclysms.

So, Nathu becomes a weapon, people like Nathu who are in normal times at the fringes of a society of a community, they are used as weapons for starting a riot and for spreading hatred and communal disharmony by the fanatics who... a handful of fanatics who favored the decision of partition.

There are a number of powerful moments in the film, where I have already talked about the language taking on a militant tone, and then the sensibility of women from all communities is remarkable. We see that women are not at the heart of politics and the larger you know larger political decisions. But they actually exhibit a lot more astuteness in different ways.

So, for example, Richard's wife wants to you know save a man who was trying to climb up their wall, and protect his own life from the riots; the man was dragged away later on. She could not save his life, she is frustrated. She gives in to consumption, she resorts to drinking more alcohol in order to drown herself, you know in order to not think of the/ imagine the social reality.

Because she cannot control anything, she despises her husband after a point because he is so callous about human killings. He is not doing anything, he is not intervening and there is a point where she looks at a Buddha statue, says that it reminds her of Gandhi. Both Buddha and Gandhi would preach about pacifism, about peace and non-violence. But her husband Richard who supposedly knows India more than her, says that... he makes an inane remark.

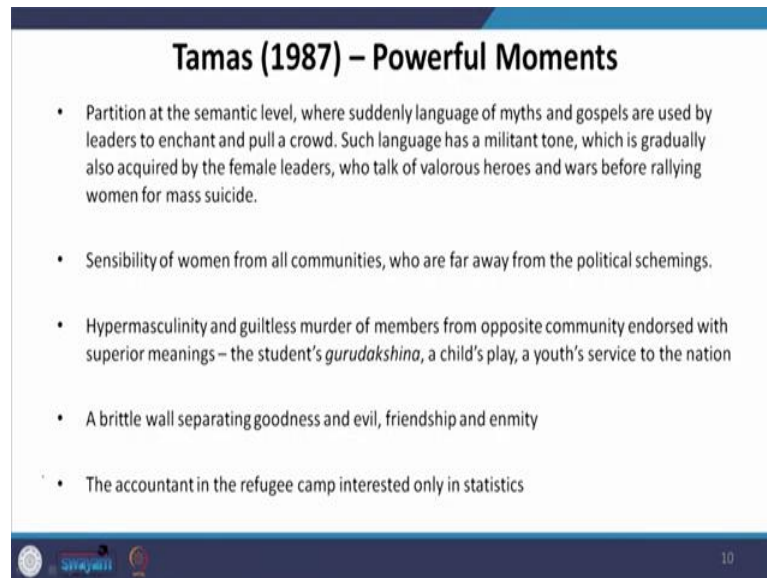
He says that why Gandhi would wear spectacles, Buddha would not. So, it shows the superficiality of the males from different communities. They did not have the insight that women sometimes exhibited. In the rich businessman Lala's household we see...we see Lala the rich businessman sending his servant with, sending his servant out with the letter amid riots, which would significantly risk his life.

And to this, his wife says that he might be a poor person and your servant, but he is a human being all the same; and we cannot risk his life just like that. So, we see the humane facets coming out among the women and they appear to have a greater you know understanding of the situation.

Nathu's wife, the Dalit males wife -- he[Nathu] is actually engulfed by.. he is inundated by negative imaginations and ultimately he is killed. He thinks that the child, the unborn child in his wife's belly will die because he has caused a sin, he has initiated this riot. But Nathu's wife makes a very important comment in this respect. She says that you must realize, you must not give yourself undue importance, you are only a marginal person in this entire you know, in this entire... in all these happenings. What role, after all, do you play?

So, do not blow up your importance beyond proportion. So, she has a reality check. And we see also the figure of the Muslim woman that refuge... that gives refuge to the sardar and his wife, while the rest of the family are fanatics, they wanted to kill the sardar and his wife.

The woman was sensible enough to not only rescue them, lead them outside of the forest, she shelters them. So, she not only rescues them, she also shelters them, she saves their valuable jewelry and returns it to them and also leads them out of the house, lest they be killed. So, it shows a kind of honesty which men lacked at that time. (Refer Slide Time: 31:40)



### Tamas (1987) – Powerful Moments

- Partition at the semantic level, where suddenly language of myths and gospels are used by leaders to enchant and pull a crowd. Such language has a militant tone, which is gradually also acquired by the female leaders, who talk of valorous heroes and wars before rallying women for mass suicide.
- Sensibility of women from all communities, who are far away from the political schemings.
- Hypermasculinity and guiltless murder of members from opposite community endorsed with superior meanings – the student's *gurudakshina*, a child's play, a youth's service to the nation
- A brittle wall separating goodness and evil, friendship and enmity
- The accountant in the refugee camp interested only in statistics

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So, we see hyper-masculinity being promoted and endorsed and being you know replaced with superior meanings. An extremist, Hindu extremist man actually initiates his student into the process of killing. And he is actually giving him some first-hand experience by making him kill some chickens.

So, the student is afraid, he has never killed anyone or anything. The student has never killed a creature before, but the act is seen as a Guru Dakshina; and later on, the act of killing, rampant killings of innocent arbitrary people, passerby on the roads, some vendors, anyone from the opposite community that one could lay one's eyes on... could be killed.

And this goes on to become a child's play, people, these school children, teenagers suddenly see... start seeing themselves as Pandavas, like I already said. And so, they are on a mission to kill the enemy, beat anyone and it is also seen... this act of killing as child's play is transcribed as youth's service to the nation. So, we see in the refugee camp... it is also a powerful moment, where the accountant is only interested in numbers, humans have been reduced to numbers. Human lives do not matter anymore.

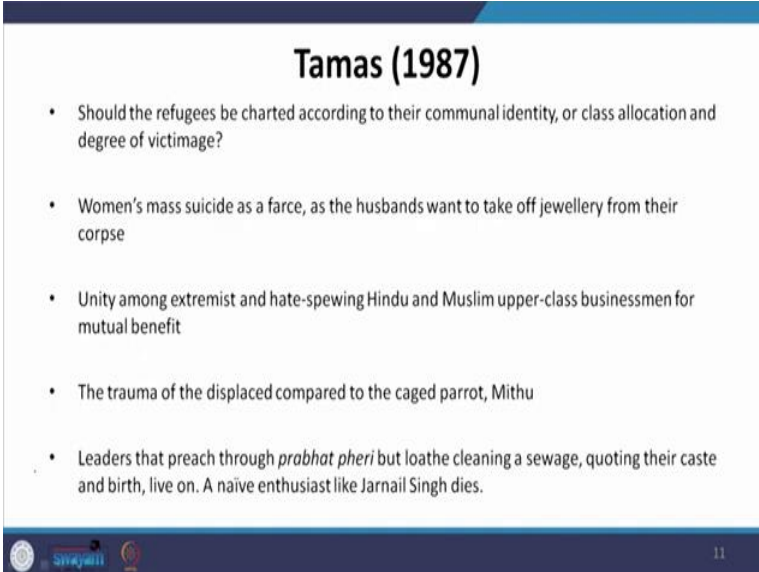
And so, he just asks for statistics; how much money one has lost and how many relatives have died. He does not... he actually is in a way trying to erase the human dimension of the terror or the sufferance. He wants to, he has made neat columns and wants to note down the statistics.

So, that is when a leader, a social worker comes and says that may be the loss of the people not be recorded in terms of their communal identity, but there should be two wide columns recording human loss, you know, in terms of their class allocation. So, the loss of the rich people versus the loss of the poor, which would expose which would debunk how much more the poorer sections have suffered as compared to the wealthier class people.

So, and we also see that the mass suicide by the women is a farce because later on, some of the husbands are looking for the dead bodies be retrieved from the well. So, they can rescue some of the gold jewelry from the dead bodies. They are hardly concerned about the wives; they want to get hold of the jewelry that the women were wearing during the suicide. The jewelry that the women were wearing on them.

So, amid the chaos it is also remarkable how there is a unity among the extremist and hate-spewing Hindus and Muslims. Hindu and Muslim businessmen, they are trying to save each other's property and collaborate; and they are working towards mutual benefit. Although both of... you know, such people from such sections actually spewed venom, they sponsored violence, they freely supplied you know resources to factions that were architects of the riots.

So, they were actually feeding you know... they were feeding and expanding and fanning the fire basically. However, these extremists Hindus and Muslims are very good friends among themselves and they save each other's property. (Refer Slide Time: 36:13)



**Tamas (1987)**

- Should the refugees be charted according to their communal identity, or class allocation and degree of victimage?
- Women's mass suicide as a farce, as the husbands want to take off jewellery from their corpse
- Unity among extremist and hate-spewing Hindu and Muslim upper-class businessmen for mutual benefit
- The trauma of the displaced compared to the caged parrot, Mithu
- Leaders that preach through *prabhat pheri* but loathe cleaning a sewage, quoting their caste and birth, live on. A naïve enthusiast like Jarnail Singh dies.

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We also see the trauma of the caged parrot Mithu, who would not leave the cage. It signifies the pain of the refugee, who is suddenly asked to leave his home or her home, but they have nowhere to go.

I mean they have grown up in a surrounding and it's now very difficult for them to leave, I mean leave the familiar situations and start life from the scratch in new circumstances. So, we also see the hypocrisy of the Congressmen, who are who actually reluctant to clean the sewage. They quote their own caste and upper-class birth, and so they want to follow and emulate Gandhi and his principles, but they loath, they are reluctant in doing base/menial jobs.

An enthusiast, a naïve enthusiast such as Jarnail Singh dies because he actually believes in all his leaders and when partition is decided, he feels that his leaders have betrayed

him, they have failed him. So, with this we come to the end of today's lecture, and we are going to continue further on this topic in our next meeting.

Thank you.