
REFLECTION ON POST INDEPENDENT INDIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL SCENARIO THROUGH THE WORK A SUITABLE BOY BY VIKRAM SETH

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Abstract

In this paper my aim is to reveal the socio-political scenario of Post Independent India through the novel *A Suitable Boy* as Vikram Seth did lot of research on this topic sitting in libraries, traveling various places observing social, political culture. Since he had spent half of his life abroad, he had no direct access to the India of fifties, which he has portrayed. As a social realist, Seth mirrors different aspects of the society faithfully. His reflection of the society, its customs and conventions and contemporary events, with vivid details establishes him as a social realist. The political situation has been meticulously presented by Seth discussing about the Nehruvian world and the eminent political leaders of the nation of this period. *A Suitable Boy* functions as a political fable, showing the emerging polity of the newly independent India throwing light on various issues of communal disharmony narrating the real happening.

Key Words: Transition, Conventions, Purdah System, Tandonite

From here when we move to *A Suitable Boy*, we find that it is the story of a society in transition, of a country marching forward searching for new ways and means of stability. It portrays the search for *A Suitable Boy* and also the struggle of a newly independent nation to establish itself. Seth tries to weave the larger themes of political and social struggle with the daily, domestic concerns of four families-the Chatterjees, Mehrahs, Khans and Kapoors. Lata is the heroine of the novel. She completes her Intermediate studies from Berhampur University and continues to be a student of English literature in the same University. Though not very fair, she is smart and attractive. Seth refers to the social fact that only a beautiful girl can aspire to get *A Suitable Boy* of her choice. Lata says that, "I am not all

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that fair either and will therefore find it impossible to get a suitable husband”¹¹ Lata is aware of her limitations and acts accordingly.

The four families make up the four plots and the two main strands in the novel are those of Lata and Maan. The political rivalry, the professional/academic rivalry, Zamindari Abolition Act, tannery works of Hareesh are the sub-plots which run simultaneously as a parallel and coordinate with the main plot.

The Chatterjees represent an ostentatious family in the novel. Seth presents before us a realistic portrayal of men and women of middle and upper class society. All the members of the Chatterjees family are in some way or other eccentrics affected by snobbery and hypocrisy. They ape the British culture. They are all Brahmos and represent the anglicized higher middle class Bengalis, most of them being barristers.

Vikram Seth though being Indian he lived he passed his life abroad so to be vis-à-vis to Indian aspect he traveled most part of India. Also to overcome a limitation of being a diasporic, Seth had to do a lot of research, interview freedom fighters, spend a great deal of time in the libraries to collect material about Zamindari Abolition Act and ornithological references to present a description of a parrot. He also referred to medical journals to portray a pregnant woman besides books of history and psychology and many other journals of that time for an understanding of the history. Seth explains his efforts in an interview:

Reading just to get a spirit of those times, meeting people, freedom fighters, people who had visited courtesans at that time ... and then staying in different places like Benares, Allahabad or in the countryside or staying with a shoe making family in Agra, just a few years doing this sort of thing because how can you claim to write about something unless you know it, if not from the heart of it, then somewhere from the inside.¹

Seth has thus meticulously imparted authenticity to the novel. It is interesting to note that Seth has referred to the religious conflicts due to the Babri Masjid-Ram Mandir dispute at Ayodhya long before the actual incident of the demolition of Babri Masjid. The Rajah of Marh in the novel wishes to construct a temple of Lord Shiva beside a mosque, The Muslims of the locality object to it and their maulvi issues a fatwa. The Hindus refuse to go back and the government fails to control the situation. As a result the communal riots break out.

Though the issues are controversial, Seth does not shirk from his responsibility in representing them faithfully.

Thus Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* reflects the social and political conditions of post-Independent India, particularly of the 1950s. Seth emerges as an artist painting a picture of many coloured Indian life on his wide canvas providing a panoramic vision to his readers. Seth refers to the plight of the scheduled castes of the early fifties in the novel. He holds a mirror to all aspects of the society from different angles, "Well, my sister says that the jatavs tried to force themselves on to the local Ram Leela committee this year. They said that at least one of the five swamis should be selected from the scheduled caste boys. Naturally no one listens to him at all. But it could spell trouble."²

These lines reflect Gandhi's war on untouchability and Ambedkar's fight against caste discrimination.

Seth refers to various social customs and conventions among the Hindus and Muslims in India. He describes the anxiety of the parents to marry off their daughters, the role played by beauty of a girl in the choice of her groom, the problem of dowry, the practice of an Indian wife not mentioning the name of her husband etc. Seth also gives a detailed account of the customs in practice in the Muslim community. When Lata expresses her intention of marrying Kabir, a Muslim, to her mother, she gets infuriated and rejects the proposal. Seth refers to the Muslim practice of divorce. He refers to the practice of purdah system, and early marriages among the Muslims. Rashid's father expresses his surprise and concern at Maan's not being married even at the age of twenty-three. He says that the Muslims consider late marriages to be a kind of "adharmā" and a married man is more respected than a bachelor and polygamy is neither infrequent nor a crime for them. Seth's introduction of the courtesans like Saeeda Bai, their singing of ghazals, concerts, illicit affairs, secrets behind the lives of gentlemen are all based on common facts observable in the society around us.

The political situation has been meticulously presented by Seth. Mahesh Kapoor, a close follower of Nehru, is a man of progressive ideas, a patriot and a freedom fighter. He takes politics to be a means of serving his people. But for politicians of corrupt stature like Agarwal, the Home Minister, "politics is the coal trade. How can you blame people if their hands and faces become a little black?"³. Mr. Agarwal is a communalist, Tandonite, traditionalist and a selfish power-monger. He misuses his power and orders the young magistrate to go ahead with firing against the picketing Jatavs at Misra Mandi in his constituency. Mahesh Kapoor feels for the unfortunate trends in the Congress party which is on the verge of a vertical split and decides to leave it and join the KMPP led by Kripalani. But he again defects to the congress party. The Tandonites detect Nehru's tact

and Tandon too resigns from the Congress Presidency and Nehru takes over that post. Nehru emerges victorious in the political coup. S.S. Sharma, the Chief Minister, a half-Nehruite and half-Tandonite votes in favour of Tandon against Kripalani for Congress Presidency, but at the very next moment realises that “we can’t do without him (Nehru)”⁴ and attaches himself to Nehru. L.N. Agarwal; a Tandonite, opposes Nehru’s leadership. Mahesh Kapoor who contests in the general elections to the State legislature is victimized by his opponents who take advantage of his resignation and defection.

Seth portrays the academic rivalry in the Universities. The political rivalry between Mahesh Kapoor and Agarwal reflects in the professional rivalry between Pran Kapoor and Prof. Mishra. Mishra tries his best to keep Pran away from the Readership in the University. He opposes Pran’s efforts to introduce James Joyce in the syllabus. He however accepts Pran’s selection as Reader in an inevitable position after being outwitted by Dr. Ila Chattopadhyaya, the expert on the Selection Committee. Learning about Kapoor’s defeat he pretends to have helped Pran out of sympathy.

Seth exposes the intellectual snobbery and complacency through the conversation between Prof Mishra and Dr. Ila Chattopadhyaya, “and neither of us has published anything of worth in the last ten years. I wonder why that is”⁵.

A Suitable Boy also functions as a political fable, showing the emerging polity of the newly independent India. Seth has used a variety of characters to show, how in the very first decade after independence the mood of the people changed from euphoria to despondence. While debating the role of students in politics, Seth briefly mentions his central theme in *A Suitable Boy* stating that, “Their post-independence romanticism and post-independence disillusionment formed a volatile mixture”.⁶

Of course Vikram Seth has the advantage of hindsight in narrating his saga of the volatile 1950’s: yet he has unerringly put his finger on the pulse of the ailing Indian polity. His diagnosis- vote-bank politics and communalism as an election tool have corroded the soul of the fledgling Indian democracy.

The political characters Vikram Seth uses fall into three categories. In the first group there are certain national figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Rajarshi Purushottom Das Tandon who appear in their real names. Vikram Seth minutely observes their role in Indian politics and points out their feet of clay. In the second category are some leaders who appear with changed names but their personalities are identifiable. There is the Purva Pradesh (Uttar Pradesh) Chief Minister called SS Sharma who looks like a spitting image of G. B. Pant. Then there are two state ministers, the secular Mahesh

Kapoor who seems to be a dramatized version of Damodar Swaroop Seth, and L.N. Agarwal who echoes the personality of C. B. Gupta. In the last group are fictional characters that represent the emergent forces in the Indian polity. Among these the two important figures are the successful subaltern Waris Khan, and the doomed idealist, Abdur Rash Mahesh Kapoor, a freedom fighter and idealist. Together they constitute of the political fable in *A Suitable Boy*. Mahesh Kapoor is a fictionalized version of Damodar Swaroop Seth, a Nehruvian from Rohilkhand whose memory is preserved in Bareilly at a park consecrated to his name. He is, in essence, a symbolic figure representing those idealistic Congressmen who were hugely disillusioned by the decadence of the Post-Independence Congress. The tragic denouement of his political career is the culmination of a rapidly political culture when real politics, manipulation, nepotism, and communalism totally perverted the Indian political value system. As the first General Election of 1952 draws near, Mahesh Kapoor is on the horns of a dilemma. Should he compromise on his ideals to secure electoral success and remain loyal to the Congress, or should he leave the parent organisation and join the Kisan Mazdur Praja Party (KMPP) floated by some idealistic, leftist Congressmen? He confides in his wife:

Pran's mother, do you know what is happening in this country? The Congress is threatening to split down the middle....Everyone who is decent is leaving. R.C. Ghosh has gone, Prakasam has gone, both Kripalani and his wife have gone.... Rafi Sahib, with his usual circus skills, is attending the meetings of both the parties ... and Nehru himself is threatening to resign from the CongressThat is not why I spent years of my life in prison. I am sick of the Congress Party, and I too am thinking of leaving it.⁷

As Mahesh Kapoor ultimately takes the plunge, resigning from the Congress and joining the KMPP, he reminisces about the genesis of the Congress infighting, and the resultant dilution of political ethics. Since Independence the Congress had been split between the leftist followers of Nehru, and the Conservative right-wing led by Sardar Patel. The Patel loyalists saw, "Nehru as rootless deracinated Indians whose sentimental creed was a pro Muslim secularism and who were divorced from the majority of his Hindu citizenry"⁸. The challenge to Nehru's supremacy arose in the form of Purushottam Das Tandon who fought for, and won, the office of the Congress President in spite of Nehru's strong opposition to, "Tandon - a barefooted, bearded, austere, and rather intolerant man, seven years Nehru's senior and like him from Allahabad now headed the organisation of the Congress party ...in most of the states the party machinery was already in the control of the conservatives."⁹

The inevitable Nehru-Tandon clash was set into motion by the constitution of the new Congress Working Committee. Tandon packed the CWC with his conservative colleagues, and “did not include...and had indeed refused to include... either his defeated opponent - Kripalani - or Kidwai, who had planned Kidwai’s campaign”.¹⁰ The Nehruites and the Tandonites differed on ideological grounds, but most of all on the Muslim question. Cornered by Tandon’s powers as the Party President, the Nehruites broke away from the Congress and formed the KMPP, whose prominent leaders included Kidwai and Kripalani. As they put pressure on Nehru, too, to quit Congress we see him caught in a dilemma. Nehru, wavering and vacillating, predictably behaves in a Hamlet-like fashion:

Nehru was now more isolated in his party than ever. Together with all the crushing burdens of the Prime Ministership.... Nehru was weighed down by the hard realization that his ideological opponents in the Party had, in effect and at last, defeated him. They had elected Tandon; they had forced Nehru’s supporters to leave the Congress in droves. They had forced the resignation of the minister. They were poised at this juncture to select their own Conservative candidates for the impending General Election. Nehru’s back was to the wall and his own indecisiveness that had helped put it there.¹¹

This Nehru realised in retrospect. However, as Vikram Seth presents it, Nehru emerges as an astute political strategist. He knew that his power lay in his rapport with the masses, his charisma, and his phenomenal popularity as the common man’s perceived saviour. Even his opponents conceded that the people “loved him, and would almost certainly vote for him as they had done ever since his grand tour in the 1930’s”¹², Out-manoeuvred by the Tandonite party-bosses, Nehru played his trump card. He resigned from the membership of the CWC. The committee lost confidence, fearing a rout in the forthcoming General Elections. To save face, Tandon offered his own resignation from the Congress Presidency. Nehru caught the main chance and mounted a fresh-offensive. “On Independence Day, Maulana Azad resigned from the CWC,”¹³. As the pressure on Tandon mounted, he was forced to summon the AICC, the highest decision making body of the Congress. He declared there:

“Nehru is not an ordinary member of the Congress Working committee: he represents the nation more today than any other individual does”. But he reaffirmed the inflexibility of his own stand, which was based on principle and he announced that if no acceptable formula could be reached by the mediators, he would resign from the Congress Presidency the next day. “And that is what the next day ... he did ... It was in effect a coup, and Nehru had won. Apparently” .¹⁴

“Apparently”-the word is revealing and loaded with irony. Nehru does emerge as the supreme leader of the Congress party, but the question that stares one in the face is whether he acted democratically in throwing out an' elected office bearer of impeccable credentials, and usurping his chair by threats and posturing. Was it not political blackmail that he resorted to? Again his action in accepting the Congress Presidency seems unfair to those who left the parent body under his encouragement and instigation, howsoever covert it may have been. Does this indulgence in political expediency hurt the careers of idealists like Kripalani and Damodar Swaroop? Vikram Seth admires Nehru's charismatic leadership, but he is not blind to the fact that even great men like Nehru have feet of clay, and that wrong means cannot be justified on grounds of noble ends. Nehru regains the reins of power, but he does so at the cost of alienating a huge body of Hindu Nationalists, and thus sows the seeds of a communalized polity. At best Nehru's triumph can be called pyrrhic victory. Vikram Seth supports the common perception that Nehru stood like a' huge banyan tree under which nothing could grow.

Let us cast a glance at the political fortunes of those whom Nehru's political somersaults left in the lurch. J B Kripalani never regained his political eminence; Rafi Ahmed Kidwai survived as he played a double game; and Mahesh Kapoor was ruined. In the novel, Mahesh Kapoor goes back to the Nehru led Congress, but his electoral prospects are hugely damaged by his days in political exile. He is defeated by a rank outsider, Waris Khan, by dubious means. More about him later, but Mahesh Kapoor is broken by his inglorious defeat: “Mahesh Kapoor looked weary. The many implications of his were coming home to him. He felt that his occupation was gone, the thing that gave his life vigour and direction and the capacity to do good”.¹⁵

Mahesh Kapoor's benefactor, the Purva Pradesh Chief Minister S.S. Sharma is another interesting political figure in *A Suitable Boy*. He is shown as a fictionalised version of the former U.P. Chief Minister, Pt. Govind Ballabh Pant. He is a good administrator: honest and impartial, with impeccable secular credentials. Yet, after the General Elections he is kicked upstairs and called to Delhi. His successor, though he seems to be grooming Mahesh Kapoor for the job, is L.N. Agarwal, a rank political opportunist who plays the Hindu- Muslim card for political gains. This is what the common public thinks of L.N. Agarwal as:

Saanp ka zahar, insaan ki khaal:

Yeh hai LN Agarwal....

Ghar ko loot ke kha gaya maal:

Home Minister Agarwal....

LN Agarwal Vapas Jao,

Baniye ki dukaan chalao!¹⁶

Yet all this clamour amounts to nothing in the world of real politic, and LN Agarwal, at the end of the novel, is all set to occupy the Chief Minister's chair in Purva Pradesh.

Thus, based on concrete human realities Seth has examined and picturised all the important facets of human relationships and has uncovered the best as well as the worst in human beings. He has attempted to underline the fact that in India, where the societies are solidarity-oriented in general, the stability of social order looms large against individual aspirations and passion. Also, in the background of saturated Hindu-Muslim conflict the need for inter-religious tolerance and understanding has been clearly established.

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