Chapter II

RIOT: A NOVEL

“History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.”


The chapter studies Shashi Tharoor’s Riot: A Novel, a searing examination of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India. Myth, memory, fantasy all constitute the raw material on which the writer depends for the construction of fictionalized history or historical fiction in the form of Riot. In Riot, he borrows from contemporary history, bringing to light various facets of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. The chapter discusses the writer’s contention that there is no history, only multiple perspectives on the past, which he puts across by using an experimental narrative structure that allows multiple narrators, each voicing his perspective on the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute and its various aspects. To support his premise, the writer interweaves the depiction of Ram Sila Poojan—the initiation of the drive for a Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya—and its violent aftereffects, with the story of an American girl murdered under mysterious circumstances during sectarian strife in India, indicating multiple possibilities. The chapter also discusses the writer’s presentation of various ways of perceiving and interpreting the Hindu-Muslim communal divide—its history and contemporary relevance.

The genesis of Riot lies in two historical facts which worked as the immediate inspiration behind this book. One is an account of a riot in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh, sent to Shashi Tharoor by an IAS friend, Harsh Mander, especially since it introduced him to the intricacies of controlling a riot. Another incident that lies at the origin of this novel is a newspaper report about an American woman who was killed in a racial disturbance in South Africa. The two events have been intermingled to produce Riot. In
the novel, the murder of an American takes place in the foreground of sectarian violence in the wake of Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute in India. Priscilla Hart, an American volunteer with a population-control awareness program in the small Uttar Pradesh town of Zalilgarh is killed in mysterious circumstances, while the town is simmering in the flames of communal riots that broke out during the Ram Sila procession.

Riot jolts the reader back to a year that changed the face of contemporary Indian politics, a year Tharoor feels has been conveniently forgotten, by both, the individual and the nation. The whole novel is set in 1989. This year is selected because of its history—a time which led to the major Ayodhya episode. Tharoor throws light on his choice of this time frame:

I think the best crystal ball is the rear-view mirror. We keep talking about 1992-93 but I find no advantage in delving into something that has been done to death. 1989 should not be forgotten. There were no less than 20 significant riots apart from the hundreds of others that swept across various small towns of the cowbelt. It is part of the writer’s job to recapture moments of history. My novel stands as a portrait of time, of tendencies that were brought to the fore, the genie that was let out of the bottle and could not be put back. I felt we should take that genie by looking it squarely in the eye. (Interview with Ganguli)

The murder and the riots in the novel are inseparable in being contemporaneous, the common cause being hatred and intolerance. The life and persona of Priscilla, and the Ayodhya dispute, of which the Ram Sila Poojan is only a part, merge in this novel. Priscilla’s murder can serve as a befitting metaphor for the dreaded demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992, which gets a mention in the “Afterword” of the novel. Tharoor provides the reader only with multiple perspectives, denying any final truth on who killed Priscilla. The Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute and its various aspects have also been treated in the same way in the novel.

Through these two cases, Tharoor questions the very nature of truth, “‘Satyameva Jayate.’ ‘Truth alone triumphs’… but sometimes I am tempted to ask, whose truth? There’s not always an easy answer” (Riot 236). In the novel, Lakshman gives voice to the writer’s own views: “The singular thing about truth, my dear, is that you can only speak
of it in the plural. Doesn’t your understanding of truth depend on how you approach it? On how much you know?” He goes on to declare: “Truth is elusive, subtle, many-sided.” Showing how impossible it is to get to the truth, Tharoor in his reading of the novel includes a fable in which a warrior goes out in quest for Truth. After a lot of wandering, he finds it—an old woman: ugly and deformed. When he asks her how he should describe her to the king, she says, “Tell them that I am young and beautiful” (Riot 137). Tharoor’s novel, through its nouvelle methodology, liberates the reader from the conventional ideas of reality and truth, which can only be found in pluralism. Riot is a text which grows beyond its poetics or rhetoric, which is neither pedantic nor didactic, where no single discourse or view is dominant.

The novel is about collisions of various sorts, with no side coming out a clear winner. There can be endless permutations and combinations, none being better than the other. This applies to all the aspects of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute and the resultant communal violence through the years. Riot delves deep into the history of the Ayodhya issue, the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy, and its implications in contemporary India. The novel, through its multiple focalizations and multiple characters as narrators, might qualify to be a dialogic text creating significant contrasts and tensions, the heterogeneous voices assuming their own heterogeneous audiences. Emphasis on the multiplicity of perspective and meaning when a country is divided against itself, torn by the ravages of communalism and intolerance, is possibly the best way to bring out history.

Tharoor has played with the idea of multiplicity—multiplicity of identities, faiths, aspirations, ideas, and perspectives as part of the Indian reality—in the novel. He has dwelled on the multiplicity from which India has forged a unique identity and unity, and the forces which attack and diminish this unity. In his India: from Midnight to the Millennium, he says, “the singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural” (6). It is this plurality, diversity and multiplicity of perspective which has been used as the basic premise on which the novel stands. The controversy over the Babri Masjid, too, emanates from India’s multiple identities, which are the cause of much hatred between communities.

The most important issue that comes up for debate in the novel is the history of the Ram Janmabhoomi—Babri Masjid site and the dispute arising out of it. The history of the dispute becomes a battlefield and one of the American characters says, “You have too
much history. Far more than you can use peacefully. So you end up wielding history like a battleaxe, against each other” (Riot 205). To this, Sarwar replies, “We, of course, have both history and mythology. Sometimes we can’t tell the difference” (Riot 87). Sarwar has put the problem quite tersely. This precisely seems to be the reason behind the ongoing Ram Janmabhoomi – Babri Masjid dispute. There are many issues involved: whether the mosque replaced a temple; is the contested site the exact birthplace of Ram, the god hero; was Ram actually born and if yes, when; is the Ayodhya of the present times the same as that mentioned in Valmiki Ramayana; what should be done now? As myth and history make a mish-mash in this dispute, it is tricky to reach any conclusion. And, it is not just history and myth but also politics that has played a role in the simmering of this debate. Again, there are many contesting views presented in the novel, on each of the issues enlisted above, each compelling the reader in a different direction. In the novel, Tharoor has tried to exhibit the complexity involved, and the futility of trying to acknowledge any one version as the authentic truth. There is never really one history, just different perspectives on the past.

The novel, says Tharoor, is about the “knowability of truth” (Interview with Ganguli). The writer builds up to this theme using a narrative technique which makes it a novel that reads “like an encyclopedia” (Riot 136). The protagonist, Lakshman, acts as the writer’s mouthpiece expressing the desire to write something in which you can turn to any page and read...they are all interconnected, but you see the interconnections differently depending on the order in which you read them. It’s like each bit of reading adds to the sum total of the reader’s knowledge, just like an encyclopedia ... The beginning foretells the end. Down with the omniscient narrator! It’s time for the omniscient reader. Let the reader create her own novel each time she reads it. (Riot 136)

Tharoor, thus, expounds his own philosophy of the novel: using the self-reflexive technique to comment on the act of writing. In keeping with the abiding mystery of the novel, the entire novel is presented through the eyes and voices of various characters, flitting between news clippings, personal letters, notebooks and journals, scrapbook notes, private conversations and transcript interviews; no omniscient narrator is holding the reader’s hand through the novel. In his interview with First City Tharoor emphasizes the multiplicity of perspectives to bring to light the dispute over the ownership of history, and
attempts to uncover the truth behind a certain event. He justifies the use of this particular narrative structure saying that it enabled each character to have his/her own voice, whatever their biases, prejudices and levels of incomprehension. He thinks that the author must inhabit the imagination of the characters, and must be able to see things as they do.

The narrative structure of the novel is striking. The story unwinds through a double helix, one strand runs through records, entries, and letters, and the other through interviews, conversations and interrogations. In all, there are seventy-eight sections of varying length. The reader is taken on a roller-coaster ride with points-of-view changing from one section to the other. Each section introduces the reader to a new perspective about Priscilla Hart’s multidimensional personality, her life and circumstances, and the various possibilities leading to her death. As some sections try to explore the socio-political condition of the time in which she lived and worked in the small north Indian town of Zalilgarh, a parallel drama is staged: the Ram Sila Poojan program and the communal strife resulting from it, as observed in that town. The two strands intertwine – independent and yet interrelated. While the reader tries to undo some of the knots, a lot of issues come to a head; many questions are raised and the reader is left on his own, to find a solution.

The narrative structure enables the story to start anywhere but end nowhere. The narrative does not follow any chronological order. Sections have been arranged according to text-time and not according to story-time. Story-time, ideally, refers to the natural chronology whereas text-time is a spatial dimension, i.e., the way events have been recorded in the novel, irrespective of natural chronology. Tharoor makes use of flashback and flash-forward techniques. The various sections are arranged in such a way that the novel begins with resolution, if spatial arrangement is considered, and then keeps hopping between exposition and complication. The opening section breaks the news on which the whole novel hangs: “Priscilla Hart, 24, of Manhattan, a volunteer with the nongovernmental organization HELP-US, was beaten and stabbed to death in Zalilgarh …Details of the killing, which occurred during Hindu-Muslim rioting in the town, remain obscure” (1). It is also mentioned that the sectarian violence in India has taken hundreds of lives over a period of three weeks. Tharoor zooms in and out of this news item in the rest of the novel, swinging his focus, pendulum-like, between Priscilla and the riots.

Tharoor has been a staunch believer in the virtues of the plurality that India offers. He has commented on the communal strife in India and the communalization of Indian
politics, time and again, in his fiction and non-fiction works. In *Riot*, mainly Lakshman, the protagonist gives voice to his thoughts. Other characters putting forward their views in this riot of ideas, beliefs and perspectives on the Ram Janmabhoomi—Babri Masjid and other related issues are mainly Professor Mohammad Sarwar, a liberal historian; the firebrand Hindu fundamentalist leader, Ram Charan Gupta and the SP of Zalilgarh, Gurinder Singh. The issues of communal rivalry, specially the Hindu-Muslim divide, and the history and politics of the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute have been discussed at length by various characters, claiming to be authentic in their own right. Although these characters have their biases, prejudices and levels of comprehension, they are neither typical of nor meant to represent any community. A multitude of narrators is needed to have, presumably, different points of view; the movement among the various points of view facilitates the reader’s sense of contrasting perspectives.

The novel takes as its pedestal the Ram Sila Poojan program by Hindu fundamentalists, which marked the initiation of the drive for a Ram temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya in the year 1989. The clash over the Babri Masjid gained momentum after this ceremonial declaration by Hindutva groups to build a temple to Ram at the exact site where the Babri Masjid stood. The Sila Poojan included two phases: consecration and collection of bricks for the construction of the proposed temple, and transportation of the consecrated bricks to Ayodhya in processions, with great religious fervor. The Sila Poojan program prompted violence at many places in the country. It is this second phase of the Ram Sila Poojan—the procession carrying consecrated bricks and the violence ensuing from it which has been fictionalized in *Riot*. The novel depicts Zalilgarh, a small town in the state of Uttar Pradesh, besieged by the communal frenzy of 1989. The Sila Poojan, the events leading up to the day of the procession, and the riots that broke out thereafter, are described in great detail which bears close resemblance to reality:

In the town, ...passions were riding high. The Hindu militants had organized a mammoth procession, some 30,000 strong in a town of just 100,000, to take consecrated bricks through the center of Zalilgarh to a collection point. From there the bricks would be transported to Ayodhya, where the Hindus hoped to use them to construct a temple, the Ram Jannabhoomi, on a disputed site occupied by a disused sixteenth-century mosque, the Babri Masjid. (*Riot* 5)
The extremist Hindu leader, Ram Charan Gupta, who is affiliated with the Sangh Parivar, takes great pride in the whole Sila Poojan program. “Yes, that was a glorious day ... September fifteenth ... the day that our leaders launched the Ram Sila Poojan program” (Riot 52). Unperturbed by the violent consequences of the Poojan, he describes it with great delight:

So after days of doing our Ram Sila Poojan in each village of the district, we had planned a big procession in Zalilgarh town on Saturday the thirtieth of September. It was intended to be the climax of all our Ram Sila Poojan work throughout the area. Volunteers from each village in the district would bring their bricks, those from each neighborhood in the town would do the same, and we would all march together in the glorious procession, shouting slogans of celebration. From there we would proceed all the way to Ayodhya, to take the bricks to the spot near the usurper’s mosque, where they were being collected for this holy purpose. At last after centuries of helplessness, we were about to right a great wrong. We were going to rebuild the temple. (Riot 54)

Tharoor presents a true-to-life account of the event. This description reveals meticulous planning and great determination for the cause. It also shows the grandeur attached to the purpose. It may be noted in this account that the ‘holy purpose’ is to undo history, which, as implied here is on the side of the ‘usurper’, i.e., Babar. Stating the aim ‘to rebuild the temple’, carries the implied meaning that the temple was already there, and needed to be built all over again. This reiterates the Hindu fundamentalists claim that the mosque was constructed where a temple already existed, that they have been wronged. Gupta, representing the Hindu fundamentalists in the novel exhibits his militant religiosity, as if it were not to build a temple but to wage a war:

They were perfect: red like the blood we would so gladly have spilled for our Lord, with the name of Ram painted on them in bold white Devanagari script. We were going to make it such a great occasion. What do you call it in English? A red-letter day. (Riot 54)

The bold declaration of using ‘Devanagari script’ reminds of the slogan ‘Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan’ used by the fundamentalists advocating a Hindu nation with Hindi as the national language. This celebration for Gupta is ‘frenzy’ to Lakshman, the District Magistrate of Zalilgarh, who has the charge of keeping the situation at hand under control. Lakshman is far from being a fundamentalist and is opposed to the drive for the
temple, as is revealed in his own account at various places in the reading of the novel. Lakshman paints the scenario after the announcement of Ram Sila Poojan program by the BJP and its affiliates:

In the next few days, much of North India was seized by a frenzy unprecedented since Partition. Groups of surcharged young men paraded the streets in every town, morning and evening, day after day, aggressively bearing bricks in the name of Ram, throwing slogans at the Muslims like acid. Slogans which were horrible in their virulence, their crudeness, their naked aggression. The Muslims, huddled in their ghettos, watched with disbelief and horror, which turned quickly to cold terror and sullen anger. (Riot 71-72)

Tensions are high among Muslims. The Ram Sila Poojan has awakened the fears of the minority community, and Hindus too are agitated. Leaders pump hatred and passion in the people on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue. Lakshman informs that it is a widespread phenomenon, not specific to Zalilgarh:

In less than ten days after the announcement of the Ram Sila Poojan, riots broke out in town after town—militant processions brandishing Ram bricks, shouting hate filled slogans day after day, violent retaliation by small Muslim groups, followed by carnage, deaths, arson, and finally curfew. At one point around three weeks after the launching of the program, as many as 108 towns were under curfew. (Riot 73)

Tharoor wants to show that the process of undoing history comes at a cost, as there is loss of life and property. He also shows the far-reaching impact of the Poojan. As shown in the novel, aggression goes hand-in-hand with this act of bigotry. Even in Zalilgarh, the atmosphere is charged because of a confrontation in which two Hindu boys, “stalwarts of the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad”, who were putting up banners, are stabbed, supposedly by Muslims, the night before the procession (Riot 58). The Muslims are afraid, anxious, easy prey for extremists and hotheads because the procession is to pass Muslim areas on the way. A small spark could ignite a conflagration, so, the local authorities are on their toes in anticipation of any untoward happening triggered by the previous night’s clash. The District Magistrate, V. Lakshman and the Superintendent of Police, Gurinder Singh call a meeting of the local “pramukhs and leaders of the RSS, the VHP, the Bajrang Dal”, the major Hindu groups in charge of the
procession, and take a promise in writing that the procession will pass peacefully. The authorities are doing their bit, but Gupta and his clan have intentions to the contrary. Gupta owns that “a few words-turds on a page” cannot deter them: “We knew it would make no difference. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen. And we were prepared” (Riot 62). This is a clear insight into the tactics adopted by the bigoted leaders to reach their goal.

As expected, all rules are flouted. Later, Lakshman realizes that the authorities have been fooled: “The legal and political processes they could have resorted to in order to achieve this agenda were abandoned. It was clear from the kind of language their leaders were using that there would be an all-out and, if necessary, violent battle to accomplish their goal” (Riot 71). This description in the novel bears close resemblance to reality: the BJP and its allies are known to have resorted to similar tactics of not keeping their word on the issue of Babri Masjid demolition. Inspired by their militant agenda, the fundamentalists never shy away from violence. The administration is helpless in controlling the intense flood of communal hatred during the procession:

... a scene of stamping feet and shouted slogans, with processionists spewing vitriol and flashing blades in the hot sun. Twice the marchers came close to attacking the town’s main mosque, and twice they were headed off. Just when it seemed that the march would proceed without serious incident, a bomb attack occurred on the procession. Shooting followed, the crowd ran amok, and Zalilgarh soon had a full-scale riot on its hands. (Riot 266)

Some agitated Muslims throw crude bombs on the procession when it passes through the Muslim areas of the town. A series of reckless destruction, savagery and murder in the town follows: “Eight people were killed in the disturbances, forty-seven injured, and hundreds of thousands of dollars of property damaged. By the standards of some of the riots that have been sweeping northern India in the wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation, Zalilgarh was a modest affair” (Riot 266). Through this newspaper report by Randy Diggs, an American journalist covering the case of Priscilla murder, Tharoor brings to light the aggression involved in the conflict. In order to put the situation under control, a curfew is imposed in the town. During this time, the DM and the SP of Zalilgarh take charge of the situation and make all-out efforts to bring to book all those responsible for crimes perpetrated during the riots. Large scale house-to-house searches
are conducted by police to catch the culprits. But during these searches, there are many instances of excesses by the police:

It was as though a frigging cyclone had swept through them. Everything in those houses had been smashed, torn, or burnt by the search teams—the TV and radio, mattresses, furniture, artifacts, everything. An old Muslim woman aged around seventy took off her kameez and salwar to show us deep lathi marks across her body. From the shoulders down to the ankles. I couldn’t bear to look. (Riot 173)

Some in the police, too, who are biased, misuse their power on the innocent. Even the Sadr of the Muslim community, Rauf-Bhai who has been helping the authorities in riot management has not been spared. Tharoor shows that in an atmosphere overflowing with hatred everybody is affected by mindless aggression, and the loss is all-encompassing. Prof Sarwar expresses his dismay at the system: “What kind of a country are we creating when the police response to a riot simply sows the seeds of the next one?” (Riot 258).

Another instance of police succumbing to prejudice and political pressure is uncovered when some powerful people of the town come out unscathed, even after committing serious crimes. It turns out that the charges filed against them by the police are of a petty nature, although they are accused of murder. That even the local politicians are involved in this naked hate mongering against the minority community is also hinted at in the novel. The MLA of Zalilgarh, Maheshwari Devi, comes to the police station to protest the arrest of the high ups of the town. But she is taken to task by Lakshman, who is furious at her sloganeering, which he finds unjustified:

Are you the representative of just one community, and not of this whole town? The last few days, when hundreds of Muslims were arrested, beaten, dragged by their beards, and placed behind bars, often on mere suspicion, even though many had no criminal records, no complaint against them, I never heard even a whimper of protest from you. But last night, because ten men have been arrested, after complaints in which they were directly named as guilty of murder, you march here within two hours and shout of injustice? How dare you! (Riot 176)

This episode is a reflection of the biased attitude of the politicians and their callous indifference to the cause of the innocent of the minority community. The police also give in to pressure from higher authorities and politicians. Those who want to sanitize the
chaos are left helpless. Lakshman tries to lay out a larger account of the causes and effects of the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, and the role of the government and others:

I saw what was happening as nothing less than an assault on the political values of secular India. I asked the permission to ban the procession in my district. It was denied. Only West Bengal, where the communists have a pretty firm hold on power, actually banned the Ram Sila Poojan program. The other state governments were trying to have it both ways. They proclaimed their secularism but did nothing to maintain it. They did not want to alienate the Hindutva types, so they refused to ban the Ram Sila Poojan. They probably thought, to give them some credit, that banning it would simply give the Hindutva movement the aura of martyrdom and so help them attract even more support. So they let it go ahead. (Riot 72)

On the same page, he adds a revealing fact:

There were certainly some in the government who had a sneaking sympathy for the cause of rebuilding the Ram Janmabhoomi temple. Not just sneaking: many expressed it openly. So the government’s inaction in the face of all this provocation profoundly alienated the Muslims. For many of them, their faith and hope in Indian secularism, built over four decades of dogged efforts by successive administrations, soured. (Riot 72)

Here, Lakshman hints at the support given by the government by showing indifference towards what is happening. Further, he tells that even the media and the intelligentsia of the country could not stay unbiased in the communally hypersensitive times.

Tharoor’s portrayal of the whole issue is not much divorced from reality. Not just the time period but exact dates shown in the novel are authentic and true to reality. He uses the names of real life people, political parties and places related with the Ram Shila Poojan and the Ram Janmabhoomi- Babri Masjid dispute.

An account of the entries of the novel reveals that the events of this novel begin on 2 February and end on 16 October 1989. However, considering the references of historical events made by various characters, readers get a wider view covering the events of pre and post 1989. Hindu-Sikh riots of 1984 and the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 are also referred to at different occasions. Brushing shoulders with reality, Tharoor refers to the declaration made by the various affiliates of the Sangh Parivar regarding the commencement of the construction of a temple in Ayodhya in March 2002 in the
“Afterword” of the novel. Indeed, the novelist has put facts of history to use, bringing life and dynamism to the novel.

To put the whole conflict on the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid in a broader light and provide a better understanding of the issue, Tharoor has presented manifold viewpoints. The characters can be perceived by the reader to indulge in a debate over the Ayodhya dispute, offering their outlook. The writer also lays out the scenario of Hindu-Muslim relations in India, from the Partition to the contemporary times, through his characters. Though, both Gupta and Lakshman are Hindus, they differ strikingly in their religious beliefs. Lakshman, accepts his religion wholeheartedly but is against any bigotry. He feels that his religion does not show the path of aversion for the followers of other religions. He substantiates his beliefs:

Actually, it’s a bit odd to speak of ‘Hindu fundamentalism,’ because Hinduism is a religion without fundamentals: no organized church, no compulsory beliefs or rites of worship, no single sacred book. The name itself denotes something less, and more, than a set of theological belief.

... ‘Hinduism’ is the name applied to the indigenous religion of India, which many Hindus simply call Sanatan Dharma, the eternal faith. It embraces an eclectic range of doctrines and practices, from pantheism to agnosticism and from faith in reincarnation to belief in the caste system. But none of these constitutes an obligatory credo for a Hindu: there are none. (Riot 143)

The reasoning that Tharoor gives is borne by many historical accounts of common knowledge. He expresses exactly analogous views in his other works too. Lakshman is his mouthpiece in the novel. Even the extract where Lakshman talks about the religious practices in his family appears straight from Tharoor’s own life. Lakshman says that although he was born in a Hindu household and his father would pray every morning, he was never forced to join him; “He exemplified the Hindu idea that religion is an intensely personal matter, that prayer is between you and whatever image of your maker you choose to worship. In the Hindu way, I was to find my own truth” (Riot 143). He says that he is happy to be a believing Hindu:

... as a Hindu I belong to the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the only true religion. I find it immensely congenial to be able
to face my fellow human beings of other faiths without being burdened by the conviction that I am embarked upon a “true path” that they have missed. (Riot 144)

Tharoor has expressed similar views in his non-fiction work, India: from Midnight to the Millennium (54-56), as also in his various articles in newspapers, and his interviews etcetera. Lakshman, as has been mentioned earlier, is voicing Tharoor’s own perspective. But Tharoor does not force his mind on the reader, and different views have been presented by other characters with equal veracity, Lakshman being one of them.

Lakshman enlists five things that divide India: “language, region, caste, class, and religion” (Riot 42). Out of these, he finds religion to be the most important aspect of Indian reality. All the religions of the world have their followers in India. And the majority of population is Hindu, though there are other subdivisions within the followers of Hinduism. He explains certain intricacies of the religion:

... Hinduism is the best antidote to Marxism. It’s interesting, in fact, how many of the leading communists before Partition were Muslims, because of their natural predisposition to egalitarianism. And Brahmins, because they had a natural affinity for dictatorship, even of the proletariat. But religion also breeds what in this country we call “communalism”—the sense of religious chauvinism that transforms itself into bigotry, and sometimes violence, against the followers of other faiths. (Riot 43-44)

Lakshman finds religious chauvinism at the root of communalism. He finds it vain to take pride in his narrow religious identity as a Hindu:

But in what precisely am I, as a Hindu, to take pride? Hinduism is no monolith; its strength is found within each Hindu, not in the collectivity. As a Hindu, I take no pride in wanting to destroy other people’s symbols, in hitting others on the head because of the cut of their beard or the cuts of their foreskin. I am proud of my Hinduism: I take pride in its diversity, in its openness, in religious freedom. (Riot 146)

Here he is hinting at the misuse of religious identity by some Hindus, who want to knock down the Babri Masjid. He is against branding of Hinduism as a label of identity, and advocates a broader identity as an Indian. He is a firm believer in the strength of Indian democracy and its pluralism as an outstanding feature.
A different perspective on Hinduism and Hindu-Muslim relations in India is presented by Ram Charan Gupta. Portrayed as a Hindu fundamentalist leader dedicated to the cause of rebuilding Ram Janmabhoomi temple, he comes out as a strong character with rigid ideas on the glory of Hinduism and an even stronger loathing for Muslims. The fervor of his religious beliefs can be estimated not only from his own views, but also from those of his clan who he refers to for inspiration. He firmly agrees with one of his colleagues, Sadhvi Rithambara and declares:

Muslims are like a lemon squirted into the cream of India. They turn it sour. We have to remove the lemon, cut it into little pieces, squeeze out the pips and throw them away. That is what we have to do, Mr. Diggs. That is what the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, the Shiv Sena, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and all the associated organizations of our political family, the Sangh Parivar, will do one day. (Riot 57)

Oblivious of his own ways and means, he does not hesitate in saying that, Muslims are fanatics and terrorists, and that they understand only the language of force. He voices a common fear of many Hindus in reality: “It will not be long before they produce enough Muslims to outnumber us Hindus in our country” (Riot 56). He feels saddened by the fact that the country was partitioned to make place for the Muslims, where the great sites of Hindu civilization, even the river Indus, from which India gets its name, now lie. What irks him is that Muslims are given many privileges like, their own personal law, state sponsored trips to Mecca, and subsidized education, etc. His aversion for Muslims knows no bounds:

But these Muslims are evil people….they are more loyal to a foreign religion, Islam, than to India. They are all converts from the Hindu faith of their ancestors, but they refuse to acknowledge this, pretending instead that they have all descended from the conquerors from Arabia or Persia or Samarkand. Fine—if that is so, let them go back to those places! Why do they stay here if they will not assimilate into our country? (Riot 54)

The BJP and its allies of the Sangh Parivar have been guided by leaders like Vir Savarkar and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalker, who have left indelible impressions of their ideology on these parties in India. Gupta quotes Golwalker’s assertion of ‘Indian nationalism’:

The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and
culture, i.e., they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land and its age-old tradition but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead. (quoted in Riot 123-24)

This implies subordination, even extermination of non-Hindus. Abjuring thus the philosophy of universalism and respect for other religions, Gupta conceptualizes a Hindu Rashtra based on Hindu solidarity on the one hand, and hatred of non-Hindus, especially Muslims on the other. In the novel, a related issue taken up for discussion is the Partition of India, which led to the formation of India as it is now, and Pakistan, a separate homeland for Muslims. Gupta is found directing Muslims of India to go to Pakistan, if they cannot stay in India in subjugation to Hindus. Professor Sarwar throws light on the Muslim perspective of the Partition designating it “less a triumph for Indian Muslims than an abdication” (Riot 109). He says that the so-called Muslim “fundamentalists” were against the Partition:

They felt that Islam should prevail over the world at large and certainly over India as a whole, and they thought it treasonous—both to India and to Islam itself—to advocate that the religion be territorially circumscribed as Jinnah and the Muslim leaguers did. Pakistan was created by “bad” Muslim, secular Muslims, not by the “good” Muslims in whose name Pakistan now claims to speak. (Riot 109)

By bringing in the matter of the Partition, Tharoor tries to trace the history of the rivalry between the Hindus and the Muslims to find out reasons for the same. Through the character of Sarwar, he presents the voice of Muslim intelligentsia. Sarwar recounts the sentiments of Muslims who stayed back in India after Partition and feel alienated because of the stigma attached to their community. They are torn between feelings of sorrow and anger because of their own guilt at being “associated with the original sin of partition” which leads them into a “sort of self-inflicted second-class citizenship” and the idea that a part of their birthright has been forfeited, respectively (Riot 109-110).

“If you don’t like it here in India,” say the crassest of the Hindu bigots, “why don’t you go to Pakistan?” how can you reply, “Because this is my home, I am entitled to it as you are,” when Jinnah and his followers have given the Hindu bigots their best excuse? (Riot 110)
Sarwar does not want to give up his stake because of what happened in the past. He asserts his faith in India’s composite religiosity, and the tradition of tolerance and communal crossovers, where Hindus worship Muslim religious figures. And, so, he refuses to accept the inferiority complex that others want the Muslims to endure:

But I’m determined to resist this minority complex that the Hindu chauvinists want to impose upon me and others like me. What makes me a minority? Is it a mathematical concept? Well, mathematically Muslims were always a minority in India, before Partition, even in the medieval Muslim period I spend my life researching and teaching. But when the great Mughals ruled on throne of Delhi, were Muslims a “minority” then? No, minorityhood is a state of mind, Mr. Diggs. (Riot 114-15)

He highlights the need of an intervention by historians and other intelligentsia to bring order in the chaos, to prevent the further deterioration of circumstances in the coming times. “We mustn’t abdicate the field of religious conflict to the chauvinists on both sides. What we need…are ‘nonsectarian histories of sectarian strife’” (Riot 64). He suggests that the historians should be unbiased and should keep their religious identity remote while probing the Ayodhya dispute which has religious overtones. He warns:

An India that denies itself to some of us could end up being denied to all of us. This would be a second Partition: and a Partition in the Indian soul would be as bad as a Partition in the Indian soil. For my sons, the only possible idea of India is that of a nation greater than the sum of its parts. An India neither Hindu nor Muslim, but both. That is the only India that will allow them to continue to call themselves Indians. (Riot 115-16)

Sarwar, thus, reaffirms Tharoor’s faith in the plural tradition of India. But the Hindu fundamentalist Gupta disowns the validity of pluralism and secularism in India. He puts the Congress Party and the Rajiv Gandhi government under scanner for being biased towards the Muslims for electoral gains. He supports his case by picking the infamous Shah Banu case from contemporary history. Shah Banu, a Muslim lady in her seventies, had filed a case seeking alimony from her husband who had divorced her, and had given her a meager sum as alimony, as per Muslim law. The Supreme Court held that the alimony payable at the time of marriage or on dissolution of marriage cannot be justified per say to be a payment on divorce. The husband is obliged to maintain a divorced wife under section 125 of Cr P C and the Muslim personal law cannot stand as a bar. The court
not only upheld her case and entitled her to alimony every month; it also reminded the government that the Constitution’s directive principles call for the establishment of a common civil code for all Indians. There was a great protest from Muslims against a common civil code. In the novel, Gupta paints a similar picture:

Their leaders acted as if the gas chambers had been prepared for their entire community. So what does the craven Rajiv Gandhi do? He quickly passes a new law, which he cynically calls the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights Upon Divorce) Act, to undo the court’s judgment. Muslim women, under the law, will have to abide by their religion’s medieval rules, and if they are left destitute, there is no protection, no remedy, available to them from our civil courts. They will have to get help from their religion’s charitable boards, the waqfs. Can you imagine such a thing? In the twentieth century? And all to accommodate the most obscurantist Muslim leaders! When will this pampering stop? (Riot 56)

Professor Mohammad Sarwar displays awareness of the common prejudices that many Hindus nurture against Muslims. The reader finds him giving his opinion on the Shah Banu case and arguing against some of the notions that Hindus like Ram Charan Gupta and the others of his clan have:

The Rajiv Gandhi government’s action on Shah Banu was pure political opportunism; it was a sellout to Muslim conservatives, but a betrayal of Muslim women and Muslim reformers. Why stigmatize the community as a whole when many amongst them too lost out in the process? ... By what statistical projection can 115 million ‘Muslims’ overtake 700 million Hindus? If a handful of Muslims are pro-Pakistani, how can one label an entire community? Surely the families of my hero Mohammed Azharuddin, or, for that matter, of the nation’s numerous Muslim hockey stars, aren’t setting off firecrackers to commemorate Indian defeats by Pakistan? But it doesn’t matter—this is not about logic or reasoning. The national mind has been afflicted with the intellectual cancer of thinking of ‘us’ and ‘them’. (Riot 114)

The Hindu-Muslim conflict in the country shapes and is shaped by the Ayodhya dispute. The masses nurturing common prejudices against the other community, fall easy prey to misleading politicians. In the novel, Ram Charan Gupta is seen detailing the whole
dispute, while mitigating the violent drive for a Ram Janmabhoomi temple at Ayodhya. He is cocksure of the validity of the steps taken by the Hindutva parties in the movement for reclaiming the disputed site for the construction of a temple to Ram. He justifies the violence emanating from the dispute, and loss of Hindu lives in the process as martyrdom. He even attempts a brief history of the site: He narrates how Lord Rama was born in Ayodhya in the “treta-yuga” and goes on to say that this temple is not an ordinary one but it is the “Ram Janmabhoomi, the birthplace of Rama.” He sings of the praises of its past glory and vehemently mourns the displacement of the temple from the “holiest site” with a mosque by a Mughal ruler from Central Asia (Riot 52).

Gupta mentions that there are “legends” about the temple at Ram Janmabhoomi, but they can hardly be a historical proof. His opinions are based on faith rather than rationality. This is corroborated by his account of the miracle: “Some devotees found an idol of Ram had emerged spontaneously in the courtyard of the mosque. It was a clear sign from god. His temple had to be built on that sacred spot.” He complains that the courts did not uphold their plea, denying the spontaneous emergence of the idol, and directed that neither Hindus nor Muslims could worship there. Tharoor has not strayed from reality in the description of the chain of events in the Ayodhya dispute. ‘Facts’ state: Rajiv Gandhi had ordered the mosque locked enraging the Muslims as well as the Hindus. Gupta confirms the inclination of the Hindus whom he claims to represent: “It is people’s wish that the birthplace of Ram must be suitably honored. If the government will not do what is necessary, the people will. We will rebuild the temple” (Riot 53). He admonishes the “so-called secularists in Delhi”, who ask for proof of the Babri-Masjid replacing a temple. He is critical of the foreign ideas imparted to us by our educational system that is Western to his mind. He enlightens Diggs about the rich Hindu oral tradition in which knowledge is “passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth”:

Ours is an oral tradition, and our tradition tells us that this is where Ram was born. In any case, does it not strike you as strange that Ayodhya is full of temples, but the most coveted spot, the most hallowed spot, the spot with the best site on a hill, is occupied by a mosque? Do these secularists think that was an accident, or a simple coincidence? (Riot 120)

There is no denying the point raised by him: it is common knowledge that India has an oral tradition. He hints at the need for separate theories of Indian historiography to suit our culture and its history. The reasoning of the mosque being located on the highest spot also tilts the argument towards him. He does not evade the doubts expressed by some
people in what he holds sanctimonious. He does not want his belief to be rubbished for the want of evidence. He comes forth and meets his contenders in the eye by giving historical proof:

Joseph Tiffenthaler, an Austrian Jesuit priest who stayed in Awadh between 1776 and 1781, wrote about how the famous temple marking the birth of Ram had been destroyed 250 years earlier and a mosque built with its stones. A British court even pronounced judgment in 1886, and I quote: “It is most unfortunate that a masjid should have been built on land specially held sacred by the Hindus...But as the event occurred 356 years ago it is too late now to remedy the grievance. All that can be done is to maintain the status quo....Any innovation could cause more harm and derangement of order than benefit.”...Does it not imply that the British acknowledged that a mosque had been built on the site of a temple, but they felt they could do nothing about it because they did not want to risk a law and order problem? (Riot 120-21)

Professor Sarwar is intrigued by the “Hindu chauvinist types” who make claims to exact knowledge of the time and place of the birth of their Lord Ram, who if their claim is accepted, was born a million years ago. He says that such assertions are unscientific and so, unacceptable. Sarwar argues that there are a number of inconsistencies and a variety of theories, mostly contradictory, as to the birth of Rama and the kingdom that he ruled or whether he “was born at all” (Riot 181).

Professor Sarwar brings in the perspective of a historian, who is well-versed with every aspect of the issue. Tharoor has dedicated a long section to Sarwar’s interview with Diggs, wherein he shares his knowledge and opinion on the dispute. He argues his case by using common knowledge and simple facts. Like, about the date of Ram’s birth he suggests:

Neither the seven-day week nor the division of the months into thirty days was included in the Hindu calendar, the panchang, until the fourth century A.D. So even if Rama was a historical rather than a mythological figure, you have to get into a lot of guesswork before you date him. The Ramayana has suggestions that Rama lived in the dwapara-yuga, about five thousand years ago, rather than the treta-yug of traditional belief. (Riot 181)
He reveals that historians who are dating the existing texts of the Ramayana agree that it was written, roughly, between 400 B.C. and A.D. 200, the same period in which Mahabharata was composed. He questions that when the date of Rama’s birth cannot be historically ascertained, how can the exact place be? But he anticipates opposition to this conclusion from the Hindu fundamentalist who refuse to be bound by the limitations of scientific method: “Who cares what proof these leftist historians demand when so many believe they know the truth? Our faith is the only proof we need” (Riot 121). Sarwar has a point against this: “The Ramayana existed as a text, as an epic, for a thousand years before anyone began treating it as sacred. There is no evidence of any temple being built to worship Rama anywhere in India before the tenth century A.D” (Riot 181-82). Not only this, Ram was deified first in south India rather than north, the site of commotion. It was actually Kamban, a Tamil poet, who first started the cult of Rambhakti in the south. Later the first community of Rama worshippers came into being in Kashmir known as the Ramanandis before Tulsidas wrote his Ramcharitmanas in the sixteenth century “elevating Rama to his present unchallenged supremacy in the Hindu pantheon” (Riot 182).

Ram Charan Gupta has other issues too; he presents the case of the demolition of other important Hindu temples too, to make place for mosques. He says that the Ram Janmabhoomi temple is not the only one to have been demolished by Muslim rulers, and there are proofs supporting this. His argument is that this can be applied to the temple in point by deductive logic. He cites the example of the Kashi Vishwanath temple:

... the back wall of the mosque is the wall of the ruined temple, complete with traces of its original Hindu carvings ... In 1937, the British themselves examined the facts and concluded—officially, with a formal report—that Gyan Vapi mosque stands upon the site of an ancient Hindu temple. Why should it have been any different with the Ram Janmabhoomi? ... Hindu temples were destroyed and replaced by mosques quite deliberately, as part of a conscious imperial strategy by the Muslim rulers to demoralize the local population and humiliate them. It was a way of saying, your Hindu gods are not so powerful, they had to bow before Muslim might, just as you must subjugate yourselves to your new Mughal masters. That was the message of the Gyan Vapi mosque, and that was the message of the so-called Babri Masjid. (Riot 122-23)
Gupta finds this proof enough to fight his case for the construction of a Ram temple at the disputed site, after demolition of the Babri Masjid. He feels the necessity of achieving the goal that the Hindutva followers have set for themselves, to restore the pride of the people he assumes to represent. But, there seems to be no end to this debate, as Professor Sarwar gives evidence for the building of temples in Ayodhya under Muslim rule, even after the Babri mosque was built. He tells that rulers like Safdar Jang provided land for the construction of the Hanumangarhi temple. He adds that many historians believe that even hundreds of years after the Babri Masjid was built, “Ayodhya filled up with temples as a result of support from the Muslim nawabs of the area, and that as the nawabi realm expanded, so did Ayodhya gain as a major Hindu pilgrimage center in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Riot 183). All these arguments in the novel are factual, extracted from the debate over the Babri Masjid.

Sarwar is aware that no amount of reasoning on the basis of historical accuracy or even common knowledge can dissuade the Hindu fundamentalists from holding their demand for a temple at the disputed site. “Isn’t this all about faith, not history? Well, the fact is that the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation is profoundly antihistorical. The bigots who spearhead it want to reinvent the past to suit their aspirations for the present” (Riot 183). He warns that if this evil is not nipped in the bud, the future may have to witness many more instances of intolerance, which he says is the real enemy. He even makes a mention of Shiv Sena, a party, he says, that expanded from being Marathi chauvinist to Hindu chauvinist, unchecked over the years (Riot 184).

Gupta declares on behalf of the Hindus who find the assertion of their faith in the dedication to cause of Ram temple:

No, the Ram Janmabhoomi temple will be built. No matter how many lives have to be sacrificed to ensure it. Our blood will irrigate the dusty soil, our sweat will mix the cement instead of water, but we will build the temple, Mr. Diggs. Mark my words. I have seen the light in the eyes of the young boys in our procession, even the very ones who were stabbed. It is not just religious fervor that makes their eyes shine, Mr., Diggs. It is the look of victory—as if some spark that has been stamped on for forty years has suddenly blazed again. This light will not be easily put out. It will shine, yes, and it will illuminate the whole of India with its flame. (Riot 124)
He declares his intentions loud and clear, and is not open to any kind of reasoning against it. His perspective is completely opposed to that of Sarwar. Although, Ram Charan Gupta is a Hindu, and Professor Mohammad Sarwar is a Muslim, they cannot be taken to represent their respective communities. While Gupta is an epitome of extremist religiosity, Sarwar is more of a historian than a Muslim; even as a Muslim he takes pride in his larger identity as an Indian and is far from being a fundamentalist. Tharoor has not tried to do the balancing act between the two; and none of them has been shown as giving up in the debate over the Ayodhya dispute. This want of a conclusion takes the reader back to the science-faith dichotomy, that is, history and mythological belief pulling in opposite directions.

The third voice on this issue is that of Lakshman. He asserts his faith in the openness and liberal nature of Hinduism and also praises the freedom that India offers to the followers of all religion. Again, he denies the possibility of Hindu fundamentalism, arguing that the faith does not have any fundamentals:

That devotees of this essentially tolerant faith want to desecrate a shrine, that they are going assaulting Muslims in its name, is to me a source of shame and sorrow. India has survived the Aryans, the Mughals, the British; it has taken from each—language, art, food, learning—and grown with all of them. To be Indian is to be part of an elusive dream we all share, a dream that fills our minds with sounds, words, flavors from many sources that we cannot easily identify. Muslim invaders may indeed have destroyed Hindu temples, putting mosques in their place, but this did not—could not—destroy the Indian dream. Nor did Hinduism suffer a fatal blow. Large, eclectic, agglomerative, the Hinduism that I know understands that faith is a matter of hearts and minds, not of bricks and stone. “Build Ram in your heart,” the Hindu is enjoined; and if Ram is in your heart, it will matter little where else he is, or is not. (Riot 144-45)

He censures the politicians who instigate acts of hatred and violence, and create divisions on the basis of narrow identities to gain political mileage. He blames it on “the twentieth-century politics of deprivation” that “… today’s Muslims have to pay a price for what Muslims may have done four hundred and fifty years ago” (Riot 145). Further, he says:
Hindu chauvinism has emerged from the competition for resources in a contentious democracy. Politicians of all faiths across India seek to mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities. By seeking voters to define themselves on these lines. Indians have been made more conscious than ever before of what divides us. (Riot 145)

To Lakshman, the politics of self-interest is the real culprit for the unbridled abhorrence between communities. He does not debate the historicity of the Ayodhya dispute, but tries to weigh the issue with respect to the contemporary Indian scenario. He suggests that followers of all religions in India should be more tolerant of the past and accept the plural tradition of the nation. He does not side with the secularists who reject the Hindu claim for the Janmasthan for the want of historical evidence.

... to me what matters is what most people believe, for their beliefs offer a sounder basis for public policy than the historians’ footnotes. And it would work better. Instead of saying to impassioned Hindus, “You are wrong, there’s no proof that the temple Babar demolished to build this mosque was a temple to Ram, go away and leave the mosque in place,” how much more effective might it have been to say, “You may be right, let us assume for a moment that there was a Ram Janmabhoomi temple here that was destroyed to make room for this mosque four hundred and sixty years ago, does that mean we should behave in that way today? If the Muslims of the 1520s acted out of ignorance and fanaticism, should Hindus act the same way in 1980s? (Riot 145-46)

Tharoor, through Lakshman, suggests finding a peaceful way-out in the present, rather than fighting over the past. He warns that if Hindus try to pay back the Muslims of the present in the same coin, it will “provoke violence and rage” and only deteriorate the current situation “irreparably” (Riot 146). He puts it very succinctly: “The rage of the Hindu mobs being stoked by the bigots is the rage of those who feel themselves supplanted in this competition of identities… They want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge” (Riot 147). Sarwar’s perspective is close to that of Lakshman. He asks questions that start a new debate on history and historiography:

But who owns India’s history? Are there my history and his and his history about my history? This is, in many ways, what this whole Ram
Janmabhoomi agitation is about—about the reclaiming of history by those who feel that they were, at one point, written out of the script. But can they write a new history without doing violence to the inheritors of the old? (Riot 110)

It is important to note here, that the text is based on the pre-demolition phase of the conflict. The Babri Masjid is still there when the events take place and the demolition finds a mention only in the “Afterword”, although the novel is written in 2001, almost ten years later. So, all this foresight of the debacle that the demolition of the Masjid would cause is actually, what the writer has experienced in his times. The fundamentalists have already done their bit by razing the Babri Masjid to ground: the shrine has been undone, if not history. What is left is the memory of the Masjid lingering in the present, reminding one of the havoc played by politics of religion, twisting and turning history for nothing more than electoral gains. History becomes the bigots’ plaything, who maliciously alter it to suit their purpose. The interplay of history, politics, and religion presents a compound view, denying authenticity to a narrow outlook in isolation from the others.

In the “Afterword”, Tharoor quotes Octavio Paz who said that we live between oblivion and memory: “Memory and oblivion: how one leads to the other, and back again, ... History, the old saying goes, is not a web woven with innocent hands” (Riot 269). Tharoor implies that history is not created by some sort of inscrutable force; it is created by human beings. And human beings have the ability of selection and omission: “History emerges as a result of people willfully using memory to drive others into oblivion or allowing the experience of recent oblivion to create new antagonistic memories” (interview with Intelligence). This is happening in the case of the Ayodhya dispute, where history is being subjected to manipulations to forge new equations of communal relationships. History is subjected to “revenge”, and the beaten and worn out version is fed to those in the present who are oblivious of the whole issue. Clashes and conflicts occur as a result of contending narratives, and these narratives are often based on recapitulations of history, in some cases contrived to make a point for its contemporary relevance and often not in a constructive way. And in this manner, history is misused “like a battleaxe” (Riot 205). It appears that in a world where cause and effect relation is not always tenable, one needs to understand history in a different way. In the novel, history does not seem to be a rational unfolding but a chaotic succession of events in which the narrators randomly clutch bits and pieces, in a futile attempt, to make sense of
their world. Its complications notwithstanding, the sense of history is important: “If you are not aware of what happened in the past, it makes you blind to the future” (interview with First City).

All through the novel, the writer assumes various voices presenting heterogeneous views on the diverse aspects of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. None of the standpoints can be ignored as frivolous as all sides have been given ample space in the text. Though Tharoor’s sympathy seems to be lying with Lakshman and Sarwar, as is borne out by his other writings, Ram Charan Gupta sounds no less convincing on the history of the Babri-Masjid. These multiple perspectives help in presenting a comprehensive view of the issue suggesting multiple possibilities. Tharoor shows no side as the winner in the novel and leaves it to the reader to decide it for himself. But the story outgrows the text: the Babri Masjid stands demolished today. Temporarily at least, the fundamentalists have won over the rational voices, though the Ram temple has not been built till date. Not only has the mosque become a part of history, it has altered India’s history and politics everlastingly.

To reinforce the significance of multiple perspectives leading to multiple conclusions and to show the repercussions of communal riots, Tharoor has merged the story of Priscilla murder with the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. Like the mosque, Priscilla Hart is murdered, made a memory by the flooding hatred in the nation. The Babri Masjid falls prey to conflicting aspirations of its claimants, so does Priscilla. Lakshman, though in love with Priscilla expresses his inability to forgo his responsibilities towards his wife Geetha and daughter Rekha. His indifference leads him to forget his promise to meet Priscilla at the Kotli on the fateful day. He is torn between his fanciful love and unpleasant marriage which he finds binding. Ultimately, Priscilla has to pay the price for his fickle emotions. She goes to the Kotli to meet him but finds death instead, and a brutal one for that. She becomes a victim of riots—in Lakshman’s mind and in the town of Zalilgarh. Circumstances take their toll on her, without leaving a decisive trace about the culprits. On the surface “Nobody would have had a reason to kill her” (Riot 2). But the reader made omniscient by Tharoor’s narrative style can find many possibilities, equally potent, evading any conclusion.

The reader is presented with the different aspects of Priscilla’s life and persona. To uncover the intricacies of her character, Tharoor depends on a variety of sources: news
reports of her death by Randy Diggs in The New York Journal; entries in her mother Katherine Hart’s diary; remarks by Shankar Das, project director, HELP-US, Zalilgarh; Priscilla’s scrapbook; letters from Priscilla to her friend, Cindy Valeriani; her father, Rudyard Hart’s conversation with Randy Diggs; Randy Diggs’ interview with District Magistrate V. Lakshman; entries in Lakshman’s journal; conversation between Mrs. Hart and Mr. Das; interaction between Priscilla and Lakshman. Bits and pieces of information collected from all these sources add up to various possibilities that could have lead to her death on 30th September 1989, Tuesday, the very day when the riots set off during the religious procession of Hindus carrying consecrated bricks to be used for the construction of a Ram Temple at Ayodhya. The chaos and uncertainty in the town shattered by communal hatred is reflective of Priscilla’s life falling apart, literally and figuratively; the circumstances provide not only an apt background for the end of a life ridden with complexities, but also an opportunity to those who have nurtured a grudge or two against her.

Priscilla and the District Magistrate, V. Lakshman, are in love, and the Kotli, where her dead-body is later found, is their meeting point every Tuesday and Saturday. The Kotli is a secluded ruin on the outskirts of the town, so it provides a suitable setting for their clandestine affair. Lakshman’s wife, Geetha, is infuriated when she gets to know of what is going on between Priscilla and her husband, and makes an attempt to deal with it in her own way. She approaches a Swami resident of the Shiva Mandir where she goes regularly, and makes a plea for help:

This time it was heartbreaking, Swamiji … He has written so many chhi-chhi things about the things they do together. And he has written that he does not love me and he is thinking of leaving me and our daughter … Please conduct a special puja for me to help me keep my husband! Yes, of course, Swamiji. Beyond a puja? Anything you say…I don’t care how you do it. Use tantra, do the tandava, use anyone and anything you want, Swamiji, but please don’t let this foreign devil-woman run away with my husband … (Riot 227)

The following Saturday, Geetha reveals that her prayers had been answered. The Swami has a nasty reputation for dabbling in tantric practices and other activities on the wrong side of the law. There have been rumors of human sacrifices that could not be proven, and the Swami has henchmen who would unquestioningly slit somebody’s throat on his
orders. The possibility of the Swami arranging for Priscilla’s murder, at the behest of the DM’s wife, cannot be ruled out.

Another possibility leading to her murder comes from her habit of going out of the way to help women, which estranges some. Priscilla works for a population control program, and is deeply involved in her project. Zalilgarh has a large Muslim population which is poor, uneducated, ignorant and orthodox. It is difficult for someone like Priscilla, a foreigner from a country like the US, not to be shocked at the lack of independence, awareness and initiative in the womenfolk of these sections of our society. In her letters to her friend Cindy Valeriani, she writes about how she has helped Fatima Bi, a Muslim woman with seven kids, in getting rid of an eighth pregnancy. Despite of being beaten and warned by her husband never to contact the population control center to avoid any guidance from them, she gathers the courage and follows the dictates of her mind, asserting her right on her body. Priscilla’s commitment to her work makes her blind to the repercussions and she goes out of her way to help, though Kadambari, the extension worker, is reluctant. Later, Ali, Fatima Bi’s husband, on knowing what has happened comes to the Centre fuming with uncontrollable anger:

He was murderously angry, eyes bloodshot and red and practically popping out of their sockets, and when he advanced toward me screaming ‘I told you to leave her alone!’ a couple of men in the office had to physically restrain him. ‘I’ll kill the foreign whore!’ he shouted as he was dragged out, flailing his fist in my direction. (Riot 233)

Later Kadambari warns her of the impending danger in the Kotli suggesting the possibility of the place being haunted by “badmashes”, but Priscilla prefers to ignore it and hide it from Lakshman as well. She has her reasons: “It’s the only place I love in Zalilgarh, and I’d rather die than give up....” (Riot 235). Ali reveals his intentions to Kadambari who is terrified by his threats:

He said he would cut off my – cut off my breasts, sir, because I had told his wife to get an abortion. Sir, I was so scared, I told him it wasn’t me, sir, it was the American girl,...and he said, sir, you tell that American whore that if I ever lay my hands on her, she won’t be catching that plane to America...he seems to mean it, sir. (Riot 244)

It is clear that Ali can go to any extreme of brutality to take his revenge. The inhuman way in which Priscilla was beaten and stabbed sixteen times may be an
indication that Ali, with enough hatred to drive him, has made use of the appropriate time and opportunity at the Kotli. He is a part of the group of Muslims who have dropped bombs at the Hindu procession in Zalilgarh, setting off large-scale riots. But he manages to flee along with his accomplices from their hiding place, and finds refuge in the Kotli. But the police later catch hold of him and interrogate him regarding the murder. SP Gurinder Singh asks him if he, having found Priscilla (whom he dislikes and has been threatening) already there and afraid that she might recognize him, has killed her? But Ali does not confess and Gurinder gives up on him, considering other possibilities. Here again, the murder and the riots intermingle; and the theme of multiple perspectives and multiple possibilities is reinforced. Hate and revenge, whether driven towards an individual or a community, take even innocents in their stride, nobody is spared; rationality and discretion are given a break.

But don't look for rational thinking in communal riots, Randy. These buggers had been at the receiving end of insults and slogans and petty offenses of all sorts for days leading up to the Ram Sila Poojan. They were maddened like a chained animal that's been regularly prodded. Of course the poor bastards felt it was time to retaliate. (Riot 133-34)

It is mob mentality that is at work in a riot. “And mobs want only one thing. Revenge” (Riot 134). There is no denying the observation made by Gurinder, who has a firsthand experience of the 1984 Hindu-Sikh riots, too. At another point he says, “In riots, all sorts of things happen. People strike first and ask questions later” (Riot 173). Lakshman holds similar opinion: “That’s how it often is in riots. A confused clamour of hatred, violence, weapons, assaults. In the end, no one is responsible. Or perhaps a whole community is responsible” (Riot 238). The anonymity that the times of riots offer makes people fearless of the consequences of their reckless actions. Group hatreds make people forget the individual and demonize whole collectives.

The torrid affair between Priscilla and Lakshman makes her vulnerable in the small town of Zalilgarh where such things cannot remain covert for long. Ram Charan Gupta, who is the main organizer of the religious procession in Zalilgarh, has been able to get information about the growing intimacy between Lakshman and Priscilla as also their routine meeting. “So our do-gooding district magistrate is having a little fling on the side, is he? With this white woman, you say? That could be a very useful information indeed, my dear. Tuesdays and Saturdays?” he retorts when Kadambari tells him about the affair
Now, blinded as he is by his militant religiosity, he can be suspected to have arranged for the killing. That he finds the information ‘useful’ seems to be hinting at his ill intentions. He instigates Makhan Singh, whose son has been injured by some Muslims the night before the procession. He suggests taking revenge on Muslims and Lakshman, “the bastard who gives them such free rein.” Gupta makes Makhan Singh a vehicle for his revenge on “Muslim-lovers”, specifically Lakshman, but is clever enough to be careful of the implications of harming the DM and suggests “a simple way” to carry out the task: “You can catch him with his pants down. Literally” (Riot 259). He shares the knowledge of their meeting on Tuesdays and Saturdays, and lays out the plan:

At the Kotli. He is alone there with a woman. The American woman we have seen cycling around town. But he is completely alone, in a deserted place. No guards to protect him.

That would be a good place to teach him a lesson, Makhan. And his woman too.

And you what day it is today? Saturday! March in the procession, visit Arup in the hospital, have your bath, perform your prayers, and go to the Kotli when the sun sets. Revenge is sweeter when you have had time to savour it. (Riot 259)

That his attempt to use Makhan Singh, who is already burning in the heat of his anger, has been successful, is made clear the next day. Ram Charan Gupta cunningly tries to suggest Makhan to play safe after the needful has been done:

Perhaps you went there after your bath, your prayers fresh in your mind, looking for the DM to teach him a lesson. But he was in Zalilgarh, putting down the riot. Instead perhaps you found out his woman, sitting there, waiting for him. Perhaps she started running away from you, and you caught her, and perhaps she fought too hard and you used your knife. Perhaps you thought of Arup, scarred and disfigured for life because this woman’s special friend won’t let us deal with these Muslims once and for all. It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to know.

After all perhaps you didn’t go there at all. Perhaps you finished your prayer and found the curfew made movement impossible, so you stayed at home. Don’t say a word! Or perhaps you went there and found the Muslim criminals already there, and you found discretion the better part of valour.
and turned back. So many possibilities... but I really don’t want to know, Makhan.

Sometimes, when you are in the position I am in, ignorance is bliss, Makhan. And I am a blissful man tonight. (Riot 262)

Ram Charan Gupta’s monologue is significant in more ways than one. It not only points at his being the possible motivation behind the murder, but also indicates the callous indifference of leaders like him, in general. His ‘I don’t want to know’ implies ‘I don’t care’. He makes another point that is in sync with the novel’s theme: he suggests that there can be ‘so many possibilities’, some of which he has already enlisted. The perspective of the observer will determine the possibility – many perspectives and as many possibilities. The murder serves twin purpose for Gupta: he rises in the estimation of Makhan by proving to be his well-wisher and saviour, and at the same time, he is able to strike a blow to Lakshman’s emotions, thus trying to downsize him. Priscilla’s crime is that she happens to be the DM’s love-interest. An innocent life is lost like many more in the country suffering from the cancer of communal hatred. Randy Diggs writes in his notebook, “…one death doesn’t make that much of a difference in a land of so many deaths” (Riot 11). Diggs’ observation is reflective of the impression that the country offers to outsiders. It also presents a picture of how the leaders like Gupta succeed in misleading and misusing innocent people by targeting their emotions to grind their own axe. This is how the masses are mobilized into rioting on the basis of communal affiliations. The ‘mislead^ wa^bliss of ‘ignorance', washing their hands off any responsibility towards the nation as a whole.

To somebody like Randy Diggs who is unaware of what has been happening in Priscilla’s life, and gets only second-hand opinion from others, there is no clue to her murder: “She lived in that little town, among Hindus, Muslims, everybody. Nobody would have had a reason to kill her” (Riot 2). He tries to make sense of Priscilla’s presence in the Kotli on the fateful day: “Perhaps she hoped for an escape from the crowded and noisy city, where Hindu militants had organized a major religious procession” (Riot 5). Ultimately, everything boils down to the riots caused in the wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute.

Like Priscilla murder, which is carried out without leaving a trace, or perhaps too many, the Babri Masjid was demolished in broad daylight. There are so many possibilities as to the perpetrators of the crime, in Tharoor’s fictional narrative as well as
in the demolition of the disputed mosque. But, in both the cases, the criminals go scot free, taking advantage of the ambiguity of circumstances at the time of the crime. This ambiguity is facilitated by mobs raging with passion. Tharoor is successful in drawing these parallels to bring out the similarity between the fictional narrative of Priscilla and the Babri Masjid demolition.

In the novel, a national narrative is juxtaposed with individual love and loss. Tharoor tries to raise big issues like communal peace and harmony using the life of ordinary people. The reader is left to gauge the extent of violence involved in the communal clashes over the Ayodhya dispute which spanned over years, but is taken up in the novel in part. The novel is a snapshot of contemporary India struggling with the forces of communalism and violence. It is about today’s people in the increasingly globalizing world, where collision and confluence seamlessly cross national and ethnic boundaries. The writer is successful in bringing out these juxtapositions and collisions through the use of multiple narrators, none of whom can be singled out as superfluous. The use of multiple narrators is an important and indispensable part of the novel. The narrative succeeds in defying the strict succession of events, arguably because of the multitude of narrators who, whether communicating face-to-face or via the written mode, seem to justify their existence in more than one way. Tharoor is triumphant in his experiment with the narrative style. Had he assumed the traditional role of an omniscient narrator, the divergent perspectives would not have been possible. The novel, packed with information, assumes a detached role because of the individuality imparted to each character allowing him speak his mind in his own words. It is with keeping this in mind that this chapter has borrowed heavily for quotes from the text. Paraphrasing the text would deprive it of its force taking away the first person conviction.

The novel offers no solutions, either to the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute or to Priscilla’s murder mystery. It is an open-ended novel—the reader is liberated to reach his own conclusions. In fact, Tharoor seems to suggest that there can be no conclusion—no authentic finality—only different ways of looking at what happened in the past. As it is, when the novel is written the Babri Masjid has already become history, which cannot be undone. Probably, Tharoor wants to demonstrate just this—nothing can be done now, history cannot be undone; but the peace and harmony of the nation and its citizens can be done away with, irreparably.

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