



Peer-Reviewed Journal

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*: A Plea for Tolerance through Religion-as-Faith

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Article Info

Received: 17 May 2025,

Received in revised form: 11 Jun 2025,

Accepted: 15 Jun 2025,

Available online: 20 Jun 2025

Keywords— *Post-colonial fiction, Vikram Seth A Suitable Boy, Indian fiction in English, Religion-as-faith, Theories of Secularism*

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Abstract

*Post-colonial novelists writing in English in India at the turn of the century such as Amitav Ghosh, Mukul Kesavan, and Vikram Seth attempt to interrogate the constructions of nationhood through its history and its institutions. All these authors locate themselves within the democratic, secular framework adopted by the nation at the time of Independence and enshrined in its Constitution. In *A Suitable Boy* Vikram Seth uses his wide canvas to portray the part that religious faith and spirituality play in the everyday lives of much of the population of the country. Ashis Nandy makes the distinction between religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology and argues that religious tolerance may be found in the heterogeneity of religion-as-faith rather than in the state policy of secularism. Vikram Seth structures his novel around the religious calendar starting with Holi in the Spring and giving detailed descriptions of Ramlila, Moharram, and the pilgrimage to the Ganga for the Pul Mela. While making a plea for tolerance among different communities by adhering to the policy of secularism, Seth portrays the religious faith and spirituality that is a living force for the true believers in spite of the politicization of institutional religion. This religious faith is rooted in the traditions and culture of each community and is a path to a spirituality which is contrasted to religion-as-ideology which is used for exclusionary identity politics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* was published in 1993 but over the last three decades since its release it has remained in currency in academic circles as well as in the literary-cultural sphere. Mira Nair's 2020 BBC teleseries in 6 parts reignited the animated debate about the unsuitability of the boy chosen for marriage in the end, and the 1400 page novel being prescribed for first year students in Delhi University has led academics to critically analyze the importance and relevance of the book being made compulsory

reading for the younger generation. The issues raised by Seth in his magnum opus about gender, caste, class, religion, electoral democracy and the nation are as pertinent today as they were at the end of the 20th century. Seth charts the history of these conflicted issues from the birth of the nation through its tumultuous journey up to the first elections, but his writing is informed by the events of the 1980s and '90s, the period in which he is writing the novel. The sustained interest in the novel in academic debates as well as in the cultural domain is testimony to the relevance of

the complex and intricate story Seth weaves in *A Suitable Boy* of Lata and the nation. While Lata's romances and quest for a suitable relationship forms the basis for the plot, it is the relationships between the different communities and the quest for a 'suitable' Indian nation that forms the real content of the novel. India got its independence along with the partition of the country on the basis of religion and, therefore, secularism, communalism, and religious tolerance have been core issues in delineating an identity for the nation from its inception to the present; indeed a large number of academic articles on the text focus on the issue of the particularities of secularism in the context of India. However, in the debate over the politics of secularism and the politicization of religion one crucial aspect of Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is neglected: that of the place of faith, religion, and spirituality in the lives of individuals and communities that plays a distinct role in defining the Indian citizenry.

The period in which Seth was writing *A Suitable Boy* saw an influx of Indian writing in English in the novel form by authors such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Mukul Kesavan, Rohinton Mistry, and Shashi Tharoor. These writers can almost always be situated within this secular-democratic tradition emerging from the Indian constitution and therefore they seem wary of portraying the power of faith in religion that is a reality for the majority of the population of India. The immediate necessity of denouncing the politicization of religion and the damage caused by it seems to have left them with little room for taking into account the central role that religion plays in the everyday life of the common Indian citizen and in the annual Indian calendar through festivals and holidays irrespective of caste and class. In a footnote in his article 'Secularism and Toleration', Partha Chatterjee summarizes Ashis Nandy's argument about secularism and religion. He writes,

Ashis Nandy makes a distinction between religion-as-faith, by which he means a way of life that is operationally plural and tolerant, and religion-as-ideology which identifies and enumerates populations of followers fighting for non-religious, usually political and economic, interests. He then suggests...that the politics of secularism is part of the same process of formation of modern state practices which promote religion-as-ideology.

Nandy's conclusion is that rather than relying on the secularism of a modernised elite we should 'explore the philosophy, the symbolism and the theology of tolerance in the various faiths of the citizens and hope that the state systems in south Asia may learn something about religious tolerance from everyday Hinduism.' (1776)

Nandy's distinction between religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology is useful in analyzing the function of religion in politics as opposed to the role it plays in spiritual faith. Nandy argues that the failure of secularism is linked to the appropriation of religion by the state rather than its professed ideology of being blind to all religions. While firmly rooted in the secular tradition, Seth uses his vast canvas to portray characters and incidents which demonstrate the place of religion-as-faith and the role of religion in spirituality as a parallel narrative to the more prevalent focus on religion-as-ideology. In a 1993 interview with Eugene Roberts Seth says, "Clearly my book is partly a plea for tolerance", and to achieve this end he focuses on the power of faith and genuine belief in divinity to counter the move use religion as exclusionary identity politics.

II. RELIGION AND FAITH: TRADITION AND RITUAL

The novels of the 1980s and '90s by male Indian English authors advocate powerfully the position that the use of religion by politicians causes irreparable damage to the national fabric of the country. Vikram Seth shares this belief with his contemporaries, but at the same time he is able to portray the significance of religion-as-faith in the expression of identity by both Hindus and Muslims. He attempts to align secularism with a religious tolerance that is the product of a knowledge in the traditions and scriptures of religious practices which forms the basis for 'religion-as-faith'. He thus refers to the long tradition behind the religious ceremonies and festivals that form an integral part of the national character. His detailed accounts, backed by thorough research, of Hindu and Muslim religious rites, ceremonies and festivals portrays a backbone of religiosity that exists, perhaps not untouched from politics but certainly in spite of it, that the other writers are not able to represent with any ease. Therefore, when Seth gives

accounts of Hindu-Muslim riots he is at least able to locate them within the religious sentiments that arise from his narrative and make a more nuanced portrayal than the simplistic stereotype of blood-thirsty hooligans.

The prominence of religion and religious activities in Seth's conception of the Indian identity can be seen in the structure of his novel. The opening section is dominated by the Spring festival of Holi, a significant portion of the middle is devoted to the Pul Mela that takes place on the shores of the River Ganga once every twelve years, and towards the end Seth ties up many of his religious concerns in the 'festival season' of Dusshera and Moharram. The novel is structured around the annual Indian calendar of religious festivals which starts in the Spring with Holi. In the year and a half that *A Suitable Boy* spans Seth makes references to almost every major North Indian Hindu festival and many Muslim religious observances and lingers over many of them to paint them in vivid detail. The major issues that emerge from secularism and communalism in the country are then tackled against the background of the spiritual and cultural manifestations of religion in the life of the ordinary citizen in every community.

Seth devotes an entire section to the festive season of Dusshera, which coincides with the Muslim period of mourning during Moharram, in order to foreground the symbolic significance of these particular religious events and to represent them as paradigmatic of the role of religion for the common citizen. Seth gives detailed accounts of the history of both Dusshera and Moharram and the ways in which they are observed over a period of almost a month partly to make them accessible to a Western readership, but more to portray the sentiments and emotions evoked by them in the two communities and thus prepare the ground for the riots that follow. He emphasizes the symbolism of this festival that makes it an important experience for the entire community:

Along the western edge of the square of Shahi Darvaza stood three huge figures - fierce and flammable - of wood, cane, and coloured paper, with red light-bulbs for their eyes. The ten-headed Ravana required twenty bulbs which flickered more menacingly than those of his lieutenants. He was the embodiment of armed evil...everyone was

comparing the effigies with those of earlier years and excitedly anticipating their conflagration as the climax of the evening: the destruction of evil, the triumph of good. (1046)

Once a year in every neighborhood the burning of the effigy of Ravana which is stuffed with firecrackers and made sensationally menacing allows the people to witness - and participate in - the destruction of manifest evil.

Seth juxtaposes his description of Dusshera with that of Moharram with great dramatic effect. Moharram, too, is observed over a ten-day period by the Muslims; but rather than a time of celebration, it is a period of mourning for the martyrs of the battle of Karbala, especially for Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet. Thorough the presentation of the marsiyas and the soz Seth documents the background of Moharram, but more importantly, he portrays the force of the grief and passion experienced by Muslims over the death of Hussain thirteen centuries ago. Seth only refers briefly to the far more sensational and more commonly known demonstration of grief during Moharram by the men who carry the tazias to their final resting place in processions and express their passion through physical self-flagellation with chains and knives which leave bloodied backs and legs. His aim is then to allow his readers to participate empathetically in these religious observances, not to represent them patronizingly as the rituals and beliefs of others who are on the margins of the newly introduced modernity of secularism.

III. SECULAR TOLERANCE VS TOLERANCE THROUGH RELIGIOUS FAITH

The fear of appearing to be sympathizers of fundamentalism usually prevents a majority of Indian English writers from representing religion outside the realm of politics. The Congress Minister Mahesh Kapoor and his wife are constructed in the novel as inhabiting the two positions of the debate of secularism: that of disavowing all religious observances, and that of religion-as-faith which is outside political alignments. Mahesh Kapoor's awareness of the insecurity of Indian Muslims in a Hindu dominated country makes him reject any outward form of religious expression, while his wife's sense

of being is not only permeated by religious spirituality but relies heavily on its external forms. Mahesh Kapoor's secularism is modelled on Nehru's ideals and actions, which strive to reassure the Muslim minority by not making a display of their own religion. Seth writes about the criticism of Nehru's actions aimed at decreasing Muslim insecurity:

All these actions infuriated people who saw Nehru as a rootless, deracinated Indian, whose sentimental creed was a pro-Muslim secularism, and who was divorced from the majority of his own Hindu citizenry (955)

Mahesh Kapoor turns down his wife's request to have a recitation of certain sections of the Ramcharitramanas in her home at the time of Ramnavmi because it would alarm the Muslims in his constituency and increase the already existing instability. Mahesh Kapoor's rationale is particularly persuasive in an environment where any form of sincere secularism is considered pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu. It is to Seth's credit then that he is able to present the other side of the coin - that of being a secular Hindu - equally convincingly through his characterization of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor. Mrs. Kapoor is constructed as a selfless, compassionate, wise woman whose generosity and humility in all her relationships is presented in almost heroic proportions. She does social work with members of Hindu and Muslim communities and canvasses with her husband for votes, winning the hearts of the women in purdah that her husband cannot reach. But she prays every day for the health and good fortune of her husband, children and grandchild in a small room in her house where she keeps her icons and quietly observes most religious events through the rituals and ceremonies associated with them, out of the sight of her scornful husband. Through her Seth portrays the widespread faith in the power and predictions of holy men in India. Her deeply ingrained faith in the outward forms of religion as defining her essential being can be seen in the incident where her husband provokes her to tears by saying that neither he nor his sons will perform shraddh, the rites for the dead, for her once she dies. But religions are by definition community based and therefore Mrs. Kapoor yearns to hold some public gatherings, such as the one for the recitation of the Ramcharitramanas, in her home. The reading of this epic is usually supposed to be

completed in one long, unbroken stint and so most of the members of the family and larger community take turns with the reading which continues through the day and night. The recitation of the holy text is supposed to bring peace (shanti) to the family but is obviously meant at one level to bring the larger family together through co-operation. After she dies, however, her husband does organize a reading of her favorite section of the Ramayana in his home, so that the narrative ultimately endorses Mrs. Kapoor's Hindu secularism.

Seth draws the characters of the younger generation as largely atheistic, or at least dismissive of the forms of religion. Observing her children, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor asks herself, "What...had happened in one generation that of her three children, only one continued to believe in what their forefathers had believed for hundreds, indeed thousands, of years?"(985) Seth locates part of the reason for this change in the modernity imported from the West. Mrs. Rupa Mehra's four children are equally disinterested in religion. To contrast the younger generation of the Kapoors and Mehra's Seth builds into the character Malati a deep-seated knowledge of religious rituals. Discussing Rupa Mehra's unlikely fondness for the medical student, Malati, who is a strong, independent woman, Seth writes, "[Malati] could talk to Mrs. Rupa Mehra about everything from religious fasts to cooking to genealogy, matters that her own westernized children showed very little interest in"(27). Seth makes a conscious effort to foreground the affiliation of religion with much more than just the faith in Hinduism or Islam. He thus emphasizes the association of religion to tradition and culture which he perceives as being lost rather than replaced by something else through the modernizing impulse. Seth's attempt to align religion to its philosophical, traditional and cultural manifestations is aimed at loosening the domination of the political-fundamentalist representation of religion. Through this portrayal of religion he is able to articulate his plea for the need for tolerance among religious communities as forming the only stable foundation for secularism. His ideal median is represented through the grandson of Mrs. Kapoor and Mrs. Tandon, Bhaskar, who participates enthusiastically in his community Ramlila, and of Feroze and Imtiaz, the Nawab of Baitar's twin sons who take turns

leading the procession carrying the tazias in conformity with their family tradition. Unlike the Kapoors and Mehras, these young people are clearly meant to serve as the required middle ground of the positive combinations of questioning and conformity, of a rootedness in an Indian tradition without the accompanying chauvinism. Neelam Srivastava calls this “‘practical’ secularism”, and writes, “it seeks to delineate how an ethical stance clearly emerges from the Indian novel in English, corresponding to the endorsement of a ‘practical’ secularism, a form of accountability that endeavours to engage with belief while upholding the importance of the separation between secularism and religion in the public sphere (46).”

IV. SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

Apart from the cultural traditions and rituals of religion Seth also includes the spirituality that emerges from religious observances in a narrative that otherwise largely documents the formation and functioning of the material institutions of the young nation. *A Suitable Boy* attempts to present the history of the nation through the histories of its peoples and Seth makes place for the role that spirituality plays in constructing a nation's identity. He gives an evocative narration of the effect that Saeeda Bai's singing of a *marsiya* on Moharram has on her and on the gathering for whom she is singing: “Saeeda Bai's eyes were closed: even for this supremely controlled artist, her art had passed beyond her own restraint. Her body, like her voice, was shaking with grief and pain. And Firoz, though he did not realize it, was himself weeping uncontrollably”. (1045) The portrayal of the felt experience of religion that goes beyond just ritual observance is the essence of religion-as-faith that Seth is consciously establishing through his narrative. And after exploring the varied religious experiences offered by the Pul Mela that takes place once every twelve years and detailed descriptions of the chaos of crowds and dips in the holy waters, he ends the section with an eternal, timeless spirituality: “Ramjap Baba remained on his platform, surrounded now on all sides by the Ganga, and continued to recite the eternal name of God”. (757)

V. FAITH AND INSTITUTIONALIZED RELIGION

In his depiction of religion-as-faith Seth also documents the problems that accompany the faith which must defy logic because it falls in the domain of the divine. He turns his critique to institutionalized religion which is, for the majority of the faithful, the fount of their beliefs. Therefore, he weaves into his depiction of the month long Ramlila celebrations the narrative of Dalits being discriminated against and kept out of the community dramatization of the Ramyan. His inclusion of the structural caste system that forms the basis of Hinduism in not simply tokenistic because he links it to the brutality of their everyday lives due to caste oppression, and the violence that is condoned when perpetrated against them by the so-called ‘upper castes’. He quotes B.R.Ambedkar towards the end of the section where the Dalit community has lost its fight to be included in the Ramlila: “Hinduism had nothing to offer those whom it had cast so pitilessly outside its fold. He had been born a Hindu, Dr. Ambedkar had said, but he would not die a Hindu”. (1039)

Seth also includes an entire section on the Pul Mela to remind his readers of the 1954 Kumbh Mela tragedy in which, according to some sources, over 500 people died and more than 2,000 were injured. In that year about 5 million people attended the Kumbh Mela. Apart from his criticism of the politicization of the Pul Mela and the lack of administrative preparedness Seth also turns his attention to the requirements of almost all religions to gather in large, unmanageable pilgrimages. After the Pul Mela tragedy many explanations are given for its causes. The last theory, Seth writes, “blamed the national character” (750). In constructing a national identity in which religion-as-faith plays a significant role Seth includes the accompanying belief in pilgrimages to holy sites that routinely end in chaos and deaths.

The issues of communalism that arise from different religions co-existing are apparent through the novel and culminate on the final day of Dusshera and Moharram which happen to coincide in that particular year. The mourning Muslims and the celebrating Hindus come in each other's path despite the efforts of officials to

organize their timing so that they would not overlap. Seth writes,

The desperate mourners thrust forward through the joyous celebrators. ...Both sides now were filled with the lust to kill - what did it matter if they too suffered martyrdom? - to attack pure evil, to defend what was dear to them - what did it matter if they died? - whether to recreate the passion of Karbala or to re-establish Ram Rajya and rid the world of the murderous, cow-slaughtering, God-defiling devils. (1058)

Seth acknowledges the role of Dusshera and Moharram in arousing the heightened emotions that obliterate rational thought and action. But he also points to the exploitation of these emotions through the riots that follow by the trouble-makers and hooligans that reside in every community. While most of the people involved in this incident rush to the safety of their homes, Hindu and Muslim mobs are soon wandering through the town, looting and killing, screaming the crazed cries of Partition - Allah-u-Akbar and Har har Mahadev. Seth is thus able to utilize his detailed representation of the major events of both religions to construct an identity for the two major communities of India through the significant role played by their religious beliefs and observances, and also to locate the origins of the religious sentiments that are exploited to trigger communal riots. Seth complicates simplistic analyses of riots caused by clashes between blood thirsty religious goons by portraying the insecurities and sentiments of common citizens like the gentle, bespectacled school teacher, Nand Kishore, who is part of the mob that attempts to attack Maan and his Muslim friend, Firoze. Maan is able to bluster his way through the murderous mob by instilling in them the fear of the retribution for their actions by that same God in whose name they are killing. By personalizing the figure of the Bhaskar's school teacher, Nand Kishore, Seth makes the point that it is the religious zeal in the common citizen that is exploited to hate and kill.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ashis Nandy's essay, 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance' begins by giving a definition of faith in religion. He writes, By faith in religion, I mean religion as a way of

life, a tradition that is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural. I say "definitionally" because, unless a religion is geographically and culturally confined to a small area, religion as a way of life has to in effect turn into a confederation of a number of ways of life, linked by a common faith having some theological space for heterogeneity. (322)

Nandy gestures to the lived reality of religion in the lives of the people of South Asia, and more importantly, he points to the heterogeneity of the ways of life within every religion. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is populated with individuals and families and communities that bring to life the pluralistic existence of religious faith in a nation that came into existence rejecting identification with any one religion. Coming from a cohort of authors who attempt to give voice to a nation Seth is distinctive in giving detailed descriptions of the important role that religion-as-faith plays in the lives of its citizens. His argument, in the final analysis, is for secular tolerance where religion is a private matter and should not interfere with public interactions. However, by the mid-1990s Seth saw the failure of the secular goal in the repeated communal riots that were becoming routine. Seth has gone on record to say that this novel is a plea for tolerance and towards that end he not only establishes his secular credentials but also probes the alternative of religion functioning through faith and spirituality to make tolerance for pluralism foundational within and among communities.

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