

Taslima Nasreen deserves to be an Indian citizen

If any individual personifies Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's dream of a day when one can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore and dinner in Kabul, underlining the unity of the Indian subcontinent, it is Taslima Nasreen. Yet, the Bangladeshi writer, now living in exile in Kolkata, is worried about the uncertainty about the extension of her residential permit which expires Feb 17.

The Swedish passport holder cannot go back to her native country because of the 'fatwa' issued against her after the publication of her novel 'Lajja' (Shame), depicting the abduction of a Hindu woman in Bangladesh. Even a change of government in Dhaka may not help her because of, as she has said, the alliance between Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina and a fundamentalist organization.

'There are signs,' Taslima says, that Sheikh Hasina is going 'to make the country more Islamist. There is no difference between the Awami League and the Jamaat-e-Islami.'

If India too shuts the door against her, it will be a 'big disaster ... because I closed my life in [Europe](#) and can't think of leaving India. I consider Bengal as my home. I love Bengal ... I don't wish to live in the West'.

This is not the first time she has spoken of her love for what she hopes will be her adopted province and country.

More than a decade ago, soon after Islamic fundamentalists in Dhaka issued a death sentence against her, she had spoken against the partition of India. India was not a 'scrap of paper to be torn apart', she had written, adding that she wanted to throw up the 'thorn' of 1947 stuck in her throat. She had also wanted those who won the 'war of liberation' in Bangladesh in 1971 to bury the two-nation theory.

But her hopes remain unfulfilled not only because the closeness of emotional and cultural ties which India and Bangladesh experienced in the early 70s has slowly disappeared but also because the Indian and West Bengal governments have been somewhat uneasy about accepting her request for citizenship.

One reason for their reluctance is her outspokenness, especially against Islamic practices, which made a [Kolkata](#) imam issue a fatwa against her. Her article in the latest issue of Outlook magazine, in which she calls upon Muslim women to burn their burqas, will also undoubtedly anger the bigoted mullahs.

In addition, the sexually explicit nature of her writings made the state government ban one of her books, 'Dwikhandita' (Divided Self), which is autobiographical like 'Meyebela' (Girlhood), which also created a stir. The Calcutta High Court lifted the ban.

Few writers, however, can recreate the atmosphere of an undivided, non-communal Bengal as poignantly as Taslima can. In one of her poems, she writes how she unconsciously waves away flies while eating rice and fish (maachh-bhat) in Sweden although there are no flies in Scandinavia. 'A piece of fish, vegetables and salt in the corner of my plate ... when I touch rice, I feel I am holding Bangladesh in my palm.' In her writings, the reference to Bangladesh can mean both halves of

Bengal.

In another poem, she imagines the scene of her house in winter where her mother is preparing tea and puffed rice (muri) with mango and olive pickles while 'I am in Scandinavia engulfed by snow and darkness'. All she wants to do is to forsake the 'red carpet receptions' and 'meetings with kings' in order to sit in the courtyard of her house eating 'watery rice (pantabhat), salt and chillies'.

As is evident, when she is not taking on the fundamentalists, she harks back to the scenes of ordinary life, which are common to both Bangladesh and West Bengal and have little to do with religion.

Salman Rushdie is another author whose love for India comes through in his fiction. The farewell lament of the storyteller in 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet' says it all: 'India, I have swum in your warm waters and run laughing in your high mountain meadows. Oh, why must everything I say end up sounding like a filmi gana ... very well then: I have walked your filthy streets, India, I have ached in my bones from the illnesses engendered by your germs India, my terra infirma, my maelstrom, my cornucopia, my crowd. India, my too-muchness, my everything at once, my Hug-me, my fable, my father, my mother and my first great truth ... Goodbye.'

Taslina Nasreen and Salman Rushdie look upon India in the manner in which, as Manmohan Singh said, people of the pre-partition generations saw the country - a vision the prime minister wants the future generations to share. If any two people deserve to be citizens of India, therefore, it is these two.

Yet, Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses' remains banned while the government did not allow his 'Midnight's Children' to be filmed in India. And now, apparently because of the fear of Muslim bigots, it seems reluctant even to extend Taslima's residential permit notwithstanding her openly declared love for India and Bengal.

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