



SIX SUSPECTS: AN INSIGHT INTO THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL SCENARIO OF CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

Vikas Swarup attempts to expose the evils that have engulfed the contemporary Indian society, through 'Six Suspects'. The plot is based on the murder of Jessica Lall, a model, in a bar in 1999. Here, the victim is Ruby Gill, a Gandhian scholar and bartender who is shot dead after she refuses to serve a notorious industrialist and movie producer. Vivek "Vicky" Rai has already run over pavement dwellers with his BMW and poached endangered blackbuck antelope. His father is the corrupt home minister of Uttar Pradesh, because of whom he has never been in jail. Not surprisingly, he is acquitted of Ruby's murder. During a gala to celebrate his acquittal, however, he is killed. Six gun-wielding guests are arrested. The rest that follows depicts the socio-cultural and political milieu of the contemporary Indian society.

Key words: Contemporary, Socio-Cultural, Political

The twentieth century has witnessed notable and remarkable changes in the field of English literature. Throughout the ages, literature has been considered to be a mirror reflecting the society. But today the idealistic has been replaced by the realistic. Indian English fiction has emerged as a new form of art expressing and voicing more factual and actual things than ever before. M. Mani Meiter says, "Indian English Literature is today one of the most authentic voices of India. In order to express Indian ethos it has made a distinctive departure from the earlier English Literature both in style and in the treatment of themes expressive of national psyche and cultural consciousness" (Mani: 2001). It has broken barriers of time and space, bridged cross-cultural gaps and transversed the borders of nationalism to produce some of the supreme creations in the history of English literature.

Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects* is a complete pen-picture of contemporary Indian society, set in the backdrop of a murder. Beginning with the murder of the son of the Home Minister of U.P. – Vicky Rai, the plot proceeds through several intricacies and turn rounds and finally reaches a surprising end. Six suspects are detained on grounds of possessing guns at the time of the murder at the venue. The novelist adeptly handles the complicated plot, which goes into the minute detail of each suspect's probability of motive. Six different lives from diverse fields are given separate existence, but ultimately Swaroop shows his skill in integrating them all into the main story line, after showing justifiable co-existence between them. Moreover the murder serves as a background to the entire socio-political and cultural situation of all



segments of the society. “Six suspects reveals Vikas Swarup’s lust for bizarre twists and outrageous coincidences and instances of appalling cruelty. There are so many ingredients stirred into the stew, that it has been quite crudely over spiced and that there has been ample recourse to fictional stock-in-trade.” (web) Swarup dissects into the different sections like political, bureaucracy, bourgeois, slum dog and elite class of the entertainment industry and brings out glaring facts about the life of all. This paper attempts to study the undercurrent of westernization culminating in socio-political and cultural changes in Contemporary Indian Society.

The novelist succeeds in presenting a holistic portrayal of the Contemporary Indian Society, because he chooses his six suspects from all walks of life. The mobile thief Munna, the filmstar Shabnam Saxena, the tribal Jiba, Mohan Kumar, the former Chief Secretary of U.P., an American who claims to be a Hollywood producer and Jaganath Rai- Home Minister of U.P. and Vicky Rai’s father are all from different strata of the society. Analysis of the motivational causes leading to the murder in case of all the six suspects calls for a deep insight into the lives of all in question. Consequently, Swaroop penetrates and explicates the story of all the six suspects, which directly leads to elucidation of this respective lives. “Nothing is spared in the author’s eagerness to hit on the winning formula. Clinches abound with elephants and snakes popping up a bit players, cows squatting in the middle of the road, people squatting on railway tracks, call centre employees with American names and split identities.” (web)

Arun Advani, the investigative journalist tries to seek the causes, motives and evidences behind the murder, which instigates him to probe into the details of the lives of the six suspects. Vicky Rai’s life and activities have been tracked irresistibly, with a morbid fascination by the journalist. The Home Minister’s son is an irate rich brat, leading a reckless life, throwing law and order to the winds by defrauding investors in the share market, bribing officials, cheating in corporate tax, etc. He had shown his contempt for law from an early age when he drove his swanky BMW over six pavement dwellers and had purchased the family members of the deceased. Further ahead he was charged of killing two black bucks in a wildlife sanctuary in Rajasthan and sent to jail for two weeks. The only eye witness- the forest ranger died within two weeks. Further while celebrating his twenty fifth birthday he asked the bare tender Ruby Gill for some more drink and when she refused, he shot her dead. After remaining in the headlines for 5 years, and several ups and downs in the case, Vicky Rai received a full acquittal on Feb. 15. Six suspects thus, “pretends to be an expose of what Indian newspapers call “page-three celebrities”, a fully-clothed urban elite whose lives revolve around parties.” (web)

The lifestyle of Vicky Rai brings forth the apathy of the politicians of today for law and order and their nonchalant way of treating the rules and regulations. Swaroop delves deeply into the life of the politician’s son and shows the horrifying face of the new generation ‘law makers’ who have actually become ‘law breakers’. From the sociological point of view people like Vicky Rai are a constant threat to the society because of their perpetual inclination to do anything, legal or illegal and placing themselves above the law of the country. The police and the politician join hands in a pact where money reigns supreme, “The murder weapon had inexplicably disappeared from the police strong-room where it was being stored. Six

witnesses, who claimed they had seen Vicky Rai pull the gun, retracted their statements.” (p.6) The incident reveals how the law is moulded, evidences destroyed and witnesses purchased by the super rich class in the contemporary Indian society.

Vicky Rai’s father, Jaganath Rai is a replica of his son, or rather the other way round. The Home Minister of U.P. epitomizes falsehood, corruption, fraud, deceit and treachery. To fulfill his vested interest he can go to any extent. He has a man Mukhtar working under him, who is charged and arrested for raping a minor girl under section 376 and 366 of IPC by an honest IPS officer Navneet Brar. Jaganath Rai calls up Navneet Brar and orders him to release Mukhtar, but when the later refuses he gets the Director General into act and gets Navneet Brar transferred to a remote place. Jaganath Rai’s conversation with the Chief Minister reveals the political condition of our country today. The former has thirty two criminal cases against him but has not been sentenced for a single one. He also has illicit relationship with a girl named Ruksana. Morality, character, truthfulness and similar virtues have vanished from the lives of the politicians and immorality, licentiousness and falsehood has grown firm roots in the political world. Swaroop brings to light this filth and dirt which is eating up the age old values and virtues of our society. The face of politics has changed as Jaganath Rai says, “Politics is a bitch, but it is like government. You crib about it but you can’t do without it either (p.73).

The power crazy and corrupt bureaucracy has been highlighted through the life of Mohan Kumar- the Ex-Chief Secretary. The saga of his journey while in term reveals the deplorable and detestable state of Indian Political and bureaucratic life. “For thirty seven years he had been in government manipulating politicians, managing colleagues and making deals. Along the way he had acquired houses in seven cities, a shopping mall in Noida and a Swiss bank account in Zurich (P.11)

Living a tenure of so many years of power, possession and prestige, he had the entire machinery of the state in his control. There had been a steady rise in his career but age had put a full stop to all his doings. Through a glimpse of his career of the novelist allows the readers to look into the corrupt world of bureaucracy where deals are made on the basis of manipulation and where deeds are signed in return of huge adjustments in funds.

Vikas Swaroop has depicted the societal conditions of contemporary India to perfection. He has picked up all the aspects and covered the entire range starting from the commodification of women in films to casting couch, life of a slum dweller to the life of jail goers, the street scene to the dance bar and then the call centre to the terrorists activities. Nikhil Iyer says, “It has all the formulaic elements of a “masala” movie with an interesting climax.” (Iyer: 2009) While showing Mohan Kumar under the fit of being possessed by the soul of Gandhiji, Swaroop insinuates the attention of the readers towards a burning issue of commodification of women in sleazy films, which lead the impressionable minds of the youth astray. “I believe that the reckless indulgence of passions promoted by the films you screen encourages unrestrained license and corruption amongst our youth” (p.119). The portrayal of semi-naked women and propagation of immoral sex through such films is an affront to our culture. Thus Swaroop gives voice to the thoughts of several Indians who want to save their children from falling prey to addiction of watching seductive films.

The Westernization of the Indian society is another issue to which Swaroop draws our attention. The Indian Youth is today lured towards pubs and discotheques which are a threat to our tradition and culture. Young girls dancing with young boys in revealing clothes has become a common practice in big cities. Munna visits such a dance club, which is considered to be one of the most happening places in the city frequented by semi nude girls of the elite class. The novelist says, “The smoke, the light the music all contribute to an atmosphere of reckless abandon, as if India has been left behind and we are in some bold new country with its own rules and regulations. (P-152)

The darker side of Indian society is revealed through the slums. Vikas Swaroop shows close and cautious observation of this aspect of our society. Through the character of Munna, Swaroop throws light upon these dark areas of our country. He tells us about “how a family of six manages to squeeze itself into an eight-by-eight foot space. How a girl protects her modesty while bathing underneath a municipal tap in full view of hundreds of people. How a married couple makes clandestine love with furtive eyes watching their every move.” (p-149)

The busy street life in places like Paharganj has also been brought out very skillfully. The novelist minutely observes the detail of common day to day activities. He wonderfully describes the street scene comprising of cows sitting in the middle of roads, open to sky tea stalls, bathrooms and hair cutting saloons the hustle bustle of hawkers, beggars and walkers etc. Larry page was shocked and shattered to see men leading lives worse than animals and said, “In just three days, Delhi had broken my heart, blown my mind and blasted my intestines” (p-234)

Swarup congregates actual and factual details of the lives of the six suspects with such scrupulous and meticulous vision that their path of lives intersect to create a compact and well knit plot. It is surprising how “Six semi-independent narrative strands, each of which might have been slapped into some sort of novella, but which eventually interlock more tightly than one was made to suppose at the outset.” (Bavaria: 2008) While focusing on the character of the tribal- Eketi, and while taking him around the country in search of the ‘Inteyagi’, Swarup shows an adept knowledge of the other two metros namely Kolkata and Chennai.

Swaroop has also shown an adept knowledge of the other two metros namely Kolkatta and Chennai while taking the tribal Eketi around the country in search of the ‘ingetayi’, Swaroop, describes the royal Durga puja pandals of Kolkatta depicting replicas of temples, domes and monuments of the entire world. Devotees throng these temporally erected temples and Eketi had landed there when the city was witnessing its biggest festivity. The Mahastami day has been aptly pictured before the readers, “And they gathered in their millions in their starched ran and immaculately ironed shirts and trousers, converting the city into one grand carnival. (p.287) The drum beats and the sound of the loudspeakers reverberating from every corner shows the writer’s thorough observation and knowledge of the event. Similarly Swaroop moves Eketi to Chennai, another metropolitan city, but with a different flavor. The elegant showrooms, the fascinating images of politicians, large advertising hoardings of blockbuster films marked the city of Chennai. The narration of the incidents and scenes in the holy city of Varanasi is also remarkable. From the description of the life of the eunuchs to the description

of the ghats of Kashi, Swaroop shows infallible strength of accuracy and precision. The Magh Mela with its drum beats, ash smeared Naga monks wearing nothing except marigold garlands, the shouts and screams of religious fervour shows Swaroop's profound knowledge of the Hindu religion as well. The statement. "Men in various stages of undress, displaying all makes of underwear, ladies struggling to protect their modesty while offering prayers with both hands," (p-325) depicts the plight of Indian pilgrimages.

Swaroop also depicts the miserable predicament of the Indians with candidness as he narrates the terrorist activities of Al Qaeda, while probing into the life of Larry Page. The motif of the activists is revealed through the character of Al-Khaled who says, "We are fighting for a revolution- the creation of an Islamic Caliphate, the Nizam-i-Islami. Our kingdom will be governed by Sharia Law, based upon the Holy Kuran and the Sunnah. We are responding to the calls of Allah and his prophet, for jihad is the cause of Allah." (p-265) Innocent people are held captive and in return release of the hardcore terrorists is demanded. The desperation and obsession of the terrorists is focused through Sikander's words when he says, "I am ready to become a martyr for Allah, I will make my body a bomb that will cause havoc among the infidels" (p-267)

Diverse social issues including the lives of eunuchs have been touched by the novelist. When Eketi is allowed to escape, he goes to Varanasi, and for the first time comes across a Eunuch. The eunuch narrates to him his saga of life, starting from his feminine feelings inspite of a masculine birth to his operation in Lucknow. "It is excruciating, but they keep you on opium for a number of days, which takes away some of the pain. Then the nirvana ceremony is performed." (p-316)

Swaroop's meticulous study of the socio-political condition prevailing in contemporary India is revealed through the depiction of the degenerated state of politics in the state of U.P. The upper middle and middle class people stay away from politics and the lower class people are exploited and utilized for vested interests. "It is our apathy and indifference that has let to the criminalization of politics and allowed mafia dons like Jaganath Rai to win elections, become MLAs and ministers and covert the entire state into their fiefdom, where they can break the law with impunity. (p-434)

The cultural scenario is focused through the depiction of the celluloid life. The sizzling glamorous and seemingly alluring life is not a reality but a fantasy. Swaroop's statement, "Men in India classify women into two categories- available and unavailable. The saved cows are their mother and sisters. The rest are fodder for their voyeuristic dreams and masturbatory fantasies," (p-28) shows the attitude of men in the so called modern society.

The long cherished dreams of young boys and girls who want to make it big in Bollywood comes in the form of "faltering sentences and floundering syntax asking me for advice, assistance and sometimes money." (p-32) These youngsters do not know the dark realities behind the pomp and glitter of the showy filmy life. Swaroop says, "Even before they made it to the casting couch they would be lured by some grabby photographer or smooth talking agent to a steamy massage parlour or sleazy brothel. And their brittle dreams of stardom would crumble against the nightmarish reality of sexual slavery." (p-33)



Our socio-cultural set up is such that the majority of people who belong to the middle class and lower middle class idealize the stars who painstakingly enjoy their stardom and luxury. Shabnam Saxena relentlessly puts down several offers of friendship by Vicky Rai and has to undergo treachery and deceit of her most trusted assistants. That's what the industry is all about.

Though Hirsh Sawney says that, "Swaroop's hackneyed descriptions and daft aphorisms are cumbersome," (Sawney). The latter, in spite of certain flaws has successfully presented a panoramic view of the contemporary Indian society. Factually the novel could have been comprised into a taint and racy 300 to 350 page suspense thriller, but actually it is dragged to 500 pages. Barring a few loopholes, Swaroop succeeds in interweaving diverse stories to achieve the desired end. All the explorations and evaluations are transformed into interconnections and convergences. The foibles and incongruities are to some extent compensated by the subtlety and adroitness of the writer. The development of different plots seems to be the favorite forte of Swaroop which he does, not in isolation but in correlation to the socio-political and cultural milieu of Contemporary India.

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