7.1. An Overview –

The twelve novels that are part of this study, together present a comprehensive picture of the interface between personal and national lives in post-independence India, from 1947 to date. By authentically documenting the achievements and failures of the people of free India, they help in understanding a complex nation and exemplify the positive role of literature in nation-building.

Gurcharan Das’ *A Fine Family* is the great Indian middle class novel built around the birth and maturation of the Indian nation-state. The negatives and positives of British rule, the drama of the valiant freedom struggle, the trauma of the Partition of India, the highs and lows of the nation-building enterprise of the sixties, and, the battle for democracy and the creation of a progressive India by a new generation in the turbulent seventies - are all seen from the hitherto neglected perspective of commoners. Gurcharan Das attaches great significance to the middle-class family as a basic unit of the nation-state. He reiterates the role of Partition refugees and middle-class entrepreneurs in nation-building. A student of philosophy who combines Vedanta with modern liberalism, he strives to reconcile conflicting ideas of spirituality and worldliness in the mind of the modern Indian citizen. In an interview with this researcher, Das emphasized the need for citizens to follow the path of dharma or duty or right action at the right time, to be responsive to societal problems in their immediate neighbourhoods. He lamented the loss of the moral core in national life and opined that the role of the writer is to disturb the conscience of the nation. Nevertheless, he foresees India becoming a great middle-class economy and reposes faith in the Indian entrepreneur and the strong Indian society that has grown despite the weak state. At the same time, he calls for a strong state that would swiftly curb corruption and encourage institutional reforms (Das, Telephone interview).

Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* is a strongly political and satirical novel which attains universal appeal through its moving depiction of the marginalised. In his portrait of India from the 1940s to the 1980s, Mistry focuses on the National Emergency declared by the Indira Gandhi government between 1975 and 1977, from the perspective of the poor, Dalits, minorities and lower middle class. He renders a detailed account of the atrocities committed
during those dark days when the decay in the polity had culminated in the suspension of fundamental rights causing irreparable damage to private lives. Several other issues overshadowing the seventies and eighties are also dealt with – the struggle of the oppressed castes for their constitutional rights, destruction of the rural economy, the ecological crisis caused by elitist development policies, separatist movements threatening the Balkanisation of India, the assassination of Premier Indira Gandhi, the anti-Sikh riots and economic crisis leading to widespread emigration. Rohinton Mistry scathingly attacks governmental and societal tyranny. He visualises an unredeemably corrupt, omnipotent system against which individuals can only struggle in vain.

In Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the socio-politically volatile Kerala of the sixties and seventies becomes a microcosm of the larger national scene marked by conflicting political ideologies, deep class divides, famine, agricultural and industrial stagnation, unemployment and above all caste and gender discrimination. In her depiction of the subaltern crushed by mighty societal and governmental forces, the novelist rewrites conventional history from the perspective of women and lower castes. Arundhati Roy’s documentation of the politics of Communist Kerala and Marxist-Naxalite movements of the sixties and seventies when peasants, labourers, Dalits and unemployed youth were raging against economic inequalities, social injustice and feudalism, analyses how on a national scale, political ideologies disappointed commoners by allying with social orthodoxy and government repression. In both subject and style, the novel overthrows hierarchies by placing the marginalised untouchables and women at the centre. A firebrand social activist, Arundhati Roy supports movements of tribals, Maoists and other disadvantaged groups against the onslaught of a plutocratic state and corporate globalization. She explores new strategies of resistance in an era of massive injustice, capitalist greed and governmental tyranny.

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in the remote north-east against the backdrop of the bloody Gorkha insurgency. It mirrors the regional secessionisms of the 1960s-1980s which threatened the idea of an integrated India and traces them to developmental disparities and class-conflicts chiefly caused by administrative failures. The novel also deals with the often painful process of emigration to the West in the 1980s in search of better prospects. On the one hand, Kiran Desai portrays the decadent colonial legacy that has left behind a soulless Anglicised class and has sown the seeds for territorial disputes. On the other hand, as a diasporic writer, she castigates the grand neo-colonial project of corporate globalization
which forces Third World immigrants to earn their livelihood in the First World suffering deprivation, insult and crises of identity. She sensitively handles the tormented psyche and undying spirit of ordinary citizens caught between violent regional or ethnic conflicts and tortuous post-colonial dilemmas. Desai makes an admirable effort to canonize all those marginalized by the abuse of power, knowledge and wealth, cutting across temporal and spatial boundaries. By centering subaltern narratives and the conveniently glossed over ugly realities of the twenty-first century world, she seeks justice for the voiceless.

Meher Pestonji’s *Pervez-A Novel* offers a comprehensive analysis of India in the nineties-caste and communal politics, the plight of innocent victims of religious riots, the paradoxical co-existence of economic liberalisation and narrow-minded communalism. While documenting the impact of the Ram Temple–Babri Mosque religious conflagration on Bombay, Pestonji exposes the divisive and opportunist stance taken by politicians and elites which breeds religious intolerance. She also underlines the role of civil society in preserving secularism and her heroine Pervez exemplifies how both individual and nation are transformed by mutual involvement. As she wrote to this researcher, "Destinies (of individuals and the nation) change direction...in periods of upheaval....it is Pervez' own sense of justice misplaced that drives her so that her personal destiny gets enmeshed with national issues. Following the upheaval in the years immediately after the demolition of Babri Masjid thousands...became far more socially conscious...For Pervez it was a wake-up call to identify with groups placing reason and humanity over fanaticism and bigotedness....becoming an agent for social change." While acknowledging the power and beauty of literature, social activist Meher Pestonji believes that more than literature, it is people who can bring about change. She notes that sixty years after freedom, Indians have finally begun to assert themselves as citizens of a democracy, taking responsibility for local governance and forcing those in power to become accountable (Pestonji, E-mail interview).

David Davidar’s *The Solitude of Emperors* narrates the journey of a young newspaper journalist in the momentous 1990s marked by economic revolution and communal strife. While depicting the tragedy of riots and lauding those committed to secularism, he indicts politicians, media, bureaucracy, police and elites. The novel innovatively includes a textbook which is meant to educate youth about secularism. The need to mould the young into responsible citizens, the crucial role of socio-economic injustice in fuelling religious fanaticism, the failure of civil society to oppose communal politicians and the need for India
to have a plural and tolerant culture are major themes in the novel. In his interview to this researcher David Davidar observed, “... the very nature of being the citizen of any country demands that we engage with social and political issues...It could be something as ‘small’ as refusing to pay a bribe or as large as the contributions made by...great political figures like Mahatma Gandhi. It would be great if literature was able to provide a tangible interface between the state and citizens but I think this is not often the case...most often it is because governments simply don’t care about what writers are saying...if they prove to be an inconvenience, in democracies they are attacked or threatened...and in dictatorships they are shot or tortured or imprisoned. None of this should discourage writers...because I strongly believe that one of the roles that writers fulfill is that they can hold up a mirror to the sins of omission and commission of the powerful” (Davidar, E-mail interview).

Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger undertakes a shocking journey into twenty-first century India with its new rules of success. The journey of the penniless rural protagonist to become a business tycoon after slaying his rich master reveals an India gridlocked in corruption, greed, inhumanity and every form of economic, social and political inequality. Adiga’s novel constantly compares the two Indias of astounding plenty and appalling poverty. It takes apart the grand narrative of Indian democracy, the facade of the Indian village paradise, the glittering power of the metropolis of New Delhi and the software miracle in Bangalore. Aravind Adiga is cynical, disillusioned and sardonic about India today. He fires a salvo on behalf of those who are ‘invisible’ in the conventional national discourse, the large mass of have-nots who are conveniently eluded from India’s growth story. He warns of a civil war-like situation born out of the rage of the subaltern. He challenges the nation to cast aside its self-deception and initiate a process of self-examination.

Vikas Swarup’s Q&A uses the perspective of a street-child who has won a billion in a quiz-show and the cinematic format to visualize twenty-first century India. It reflects almost every national issue - slums and poverty, the world of glamour, corruption, breakdown of law and order, abuse of women and children. Real knowledge of life and practical wisdom become powerful weapons of the have-nots as they take on a plutocratic system. Q&A is a positive affirmation of the never-say-die spirit of the poorest that keeps India moving. Vikas Swarup’s crime thriller Six Suspects portrays varied spheres of national life which have degenerated into fiefdoms of unscrupulous ruling elites. It dissects and castigates the Indian political system and the failure of citizens to discharge their civic responsibilities. It hints at a
revolution of the have-nots who will finally overthrow constitutional structures. Vikas Swarup’s novels offer a top diplomat’s view of Indian society and polity. He is firmly on the side of the underdog and rages against the abuse of power. In an interview with this researcher Swarup observed, “....both novels (Q&A and Six Suspects) seek to present a microcosm of India....The choice of Ram Mohammad Thomas as the protagonist in Q&A was dictated by the need to make him emblematic of street kids of India, transcending the barriers of region and religion. In Six Suspects a polyphonic narrative device was employed to render the complex contradictions of Indian society more manageable. In a sense all personal destinies are entwined with the national destiny as a country is made by its people. But some citizens have always been more equal than others. Literature can therefore become the voice of the voiceless, injecting a new perspective into the narrative of national development. At the same time it is a personal choice of every author. There are some who feel the weight of social responsibility more than others. I like to maintain that my books do not have a message, but they do have a conscience” (Swarup, E-mail interview).

Tarun Tejpal’s The Story Of My Assassins is a multi-layered novel centered around a journalist who has exposed corruption in the highest levels of governance and the lives of five criminals arrested for attempting to kill him. It becomes a narration of history from the perspective of the downtrodden forced into crime by injustice and inequality. The novel deconstructs contemporary India marked by massive divides of class and caste and run by soulless politicians, ruthless corporates and underworld dons. Tarun Tejpal’s anger is directed against those deceptive power-centres which manipulate the lives of citizens. As the founder of Tehelka, an organization dedicated to aggressive public interest journalism, Tejpal has led sting operations exposing corruption among the ruling elite. He has had to pay the price for uncovering outrageous scams and scandals and his fiction is influenced by his journalism.

Manjula Padmanabhan’s Escape is a post-modern feminist dystopia depicting the tyrannical tendencies, plutocracy, inhuman use of technology and other evils of modern-day statecraft reaching their penultimate stage. The science-fiction novel set in an imaginary land which bears resemblances to India, moves from the extermination of women in a male-dominated civilization to a universalized picture of the interface between the weak individual and the powerful autocratic state. Escape holds a mirror to the dangerous future the nation-state would have to face if it allows the victimization of women and Nature and pursues neo-colonial policies of governance which choose the rich over the poor and divorce development
from freedom. Manjula Padmanabhan implies that the personal and the political are one. She suggests that taking the feminine perspective into account is essential to inclusive development and sensitive governance. She has strong pro-ecological views and calls for ethics and moderation in the use of ultra-modern technologies. Her characters embody the ultimate triumph of the spirit of liberty and humanity. Her emphasis is on the self-awareness of the woman and other subalterns who must find their voice and identity and move forward to craft their own destiny and that of the nation.

Arun Joshi’s *The City and The River* attempts to find a path towards national salvation. In his last novel, the philosopher-novelist seeks to resolve the existential crisis of the nation. The novel which combines ancient mythical metaphors with modern images is a powerful political allegory symbolic of the nation’s destiny. Amid the unending battle between the tyrannical rulers and the helpless masses, Joshi makes it evident that without moral fibre nationhood and statecraft degenerate into meaningless ideas. The individual is urged to fearlessly fight tyranny and selflessly follow the dictates of conscience and duty, since this is the only means of liberation from the deathly cycle of power struggles. Arun Joshi returns to the vision of India’s founding fathers. He uses ancient Indian philosophy to define a positive role for commoners in moulding a bright national destiny through idealism, self-sacrifice and self-purification. His is a cosmic vision of the truth and a panacea to the maladies of personal and national lives. Arun Joshi seems to suggest that the Gandhian synthesis of spirituality and politics alone can bind state and citizen together with strong ethical codes.

7.2. Themes and Issues –

An overview of the major themes and issues dealt with in the selected novels offers vital insights into the mutual interaction between individual characters or private lives on the one hand, and, major national events or socio-political forces, mechanism and philosophy of the Indian nation-state on the other. Some significant conclusions may also be drawn with regard to the functioning of Indian democracy and the roles of government and citizen. This also helps to assess the selected novels as historical documents which not only help in understanding a complex nation but also exemplify the role of literature in national life.

7.2.1. Assessing Indian Democracy –

The selected novels follow the trajectory of Indian democracy. The period from the 1940s
to the 1960s, despite tremendous crises of national integration, security and economic self-sufficiency, saw an admirable attempt to establish democracy. For instance, Gurcharan Das in *A Fine Family* poignantly evokes the shared budding dreams of a newly independent India, the progressive Nehruvian ideals and patriotic enthusiasm of middle-class families and new-generation entrepreneurs, all of which are seen to be gradually replaced by divisive and self-seeking tendencies. By the 1970s and 1980s, political participation spread from elections to mass agitations based on the politics of identity, language, religion and region. There were movements for greater autonomy and statehood, Dalit and tribal agitations, movements of peasants and workers. These, while allowing for popular participation, also resulted in a crisis of governability. These developments are exemplified in the greater social consciousness among the Dalits referred to in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, the Marxist revolution in Kerala documented by Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* and the Gorkha movement for a separate state in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*. In the 1970s a greater centralization of authority with the Union government was observed, resulting in a decline in the Parliament, free press and judiciary as also political violence and corruption. However, this was challenged by movements for decentralization and by the use of the vote as weapon against tyranny by the poor. These trends are seen in the depiction of the National Emergency of 1975-1977 in Gurcharan Das’ *A Fine Family* and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*.

The post-1980 era saw several grass roots movements of lower castes, middle classes and the poor disillusioned with institutional policies and seeking alternative political spaces. If the nineties saw economic liberalisation and the advent of globalisation, the simultaneous rise of religious nationalism and communal politics shook Indian democracy. This is seen in Meher Pestonji’s *Pervez – A Novel* and David Davidar’s *The Solitude of Emperors* which point to a dangerous paradigm shift vis-a-vis issues of religion and governance in the Indian polity. These novels while condemning radical ideologies and the failure to curb communalist forces, are also conscious of the power of secular ideals uniting India.

In the twenty-first century, while Indian democracy is institutionally well-secured, it is embattled by vast socio-economic disparities, intolerance and abuse of power. Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A* and *Six Suspects* and Tarun Tejpal’s *The Story Of My Assassins* create national narratives of the new millennium. They foreground the marginalised and expose the decay in the polity, use of the government machinery as instruments of the powerful, the great Indian class divide, dictatorship of global corporates and the collapse of ethics. They capture the glitter of the ultra-modern metropolises, but, their
keen eyes never miss the poor who are forced into crime to keep pace with the India of the rich. They suggest the danger of mass disillusionment with a failed system and predict non-violent agitations turning into terrorism, insurgency and crime against the privileged.

Overall, the study of the selected novels suggests that while Indian democracy has certainly expanded, it has not deepened in equal measure. According to political scientist Niraja Jayal, from the formal view comprising solely of elections and constitutional structures, Indian democracy has been a great success. But for those who subscribe to the substantive model ensuring effective public control over governance and guaranteeing political, economic and social equality, Indian democracy appears to be a failure (Jayal 1-6).

7.2.2. Documenting the Government-Citizen Interface –

Certain vital observations about the functioning of the Indian nation-state especially the vital roles of and the interface between government and citizens may be deduced from the common themes that run through all the selected novels.

A close reading of the selected novels reveals that the Indian nation-state was founded on resilient democratic institutions. However, over the years, manipulated by power-hungry politicians and unable to meet the just expectations of the masses in the face of rapid socio-economic change, public institutions have been losing their moral authority and ability to govern. Today, the Indian political system is trapped between omnipotent capitalist lobbies and impoverished masses struggling for inclusive development. At the core of this crisis of governance lies the absolute corruption and criminalization of political parties and electoral politics, which is seen in almost all the novels especially Swarup’s Six Suspects, Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger and Tejpal’s The Story Of My Assassins. While the corruption in the bureaucracy leads to the nullification of even the best legislations, the overburdened, ill-equipped and underpaid police machinery suffers from the tag of brutality, partiality and inefficiency. Each novel paints the bleak picture of a deeply politicized police and bureaucracy. Police atrocities figure in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance, Vikas Swarup’s Q&A, Arun Joshi’s The City and The River and Tarun Tejpal’s The Story Of My Assassins. The soul-dead bureaucracy figures prominently in Vikas Swarup’s Six Suspects, Joshi’s The City and The River and Tejpal’s The Story Of My Assassins. Often, public institutions abdicate their own powers through inaction. The passivity of police or civilian administration and lack of accountability on the part of public servants is seen to be the chief cause of public misery in the accounts of the 1975 emergency
by Gurcharan Das, Rohinton Mistry and Arun Joshi, in the reference to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots by Rohinton Mistry, in the depiction of the 1992-93 religious riots in Meher Pestonji’s *Pervez - A Novel* and David Davidar’s *The Solitude of Emperors* Pestonji and Davidar. Aravind Adiga, Vikas Swarup and Tarun Tejpal castigate the present-day behaviour of public servants at a lower level ranging from clerks and constables to staff in government schools and hospitals. The disdain for the rule of law shown by public servants and political actors has several causes ranging from increasing materialism to acceptance of corruption. Even civil society institutions and the media are affected by this malaise. The failures of the criminal justice system to swiftly prosecuting the truly guilty are castigated by Swarup in *Six Suspects* and Tejpal in *The Story Of My Assassins*.

The selected novels critique objectively the roles played by the citizen and the government in post-independence India, both with regard to what these roles are and what they ought to be. They laud the positive contributions of citizens and governments and condemn their failures. Each novel reiterates the idea of the individual patiently rebuilding what has been destroyed by politics and history, state and government – whether it is the Partition refugees Gurcharan Das’s *A Fine Family* or citizens and groups who fight for religious harmony in Meher Pestonji’s *Pervez* or David Davidar’s *The Solitude of Emperors* or the struggle of the underdog in Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A* to overcome an elitist system. The role of the free press and of civil society in enforcing political accountability is debated by Meher Pestonji and David Davidar and by Vikas Swarup in *Six Suspects*, while Tarun Tejpal’s *The Story Of My Assassins* laments the subjugation of the press to vested interests. There are so many stories of the triumphs of individuals over corrupt systems and cruel destinies. The spirit of resilience runs as a common thread through all the novels, uniting the sagas of citizens nurturing liberty and peace, progress and fraternity despite the Partition of 1947, the class-wars and violent secessionism of the 1960s-1980s, the Emergency of the 1970s, the religious riots of the 1990s and the double onslaught of imperialist globalisation and religion-based terrorism in the new millennium. Those unable to balance and rebuild, to depend on private initiative when government mechanisms falter, end in failure. As far as the government is concerned, the selected novels reveal its vast sweep over the fates of millions and its gradually increasing totalitarianism, populism and divorce from constitutional values. Even as the plutocratic government appears to abdicate its role in reconciling economic and political democracy, mediation of the citizenry becomes inevitable. Various movements for justice and liberty are an inspiring example of democratic ethos.
A critical reading of the selected novels suggests the continuing negative influence of colonial legacies on the state machinery. Even after the formal end of colonialism, colonial centres continue to dominate through ruling elites, foreign aid, World Bank models of development and multi-national corporations. These novels suggest a disillusionment with the exclusionary, oppressive nature of the postcolonial nation-state. Theirs is an attempt to remember old scars, re-interpret canons and re-claim lost territory, to fight the continuing colonisation of the weak, the coercion and exploitation practised in the name of development, to rescue native cultures from the homogenising onslaught of globalization.

In order to represent the post-colonial nation, the selected novelists make use of local communities and geography. If Gurcharan Das evokes the vibrant, close-knit community life in undivided Punjab and the pathos of its end, the decadent romance of colonial Simla and of a dynamic cosmopolitan Bombay, Rohinton Mistry paints the villages of North India and the slums of Bombay during the seventies, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai evoke volatile rural communities in Kerala and the North-East respectively, Meher Pestonji captures the fast-changing Goa and Bombay of the nineties while David Davidar delves into Bombay and remote South India during the same period. Aravind Adiga, Vikas Swarup and Tarun Tejpal move with equal ease among the metropolises of Bombay, Delhi and Bangalore and the slums, chawls, towns and villages of India. Manjula Padmanabhan and Arun Joshi attempt to encompass India of all times and places in their novels set in symbolic nameless, imagined territories. These writers contest that the very idea of India is a pluralistic construction with fragmented histories and narratives, open to endless interpretation. Unhappy with the state of the nation, they debate ideas of nationhood.

Subaltern studies are a major sphere of current post-colonial practice. In this context, the selected novels seek new ways of turning native subalterns from silent objects into autonomous speaking subjects who engage with hegemonic structures. They focus on those citizens who have been traditionally sidelined from the national mainstream. Several of the novelists show those crushed by society and fate, history and politics playing an active redemptive role in national life.

With regard to the depiction of the have-nots, Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* depicts how the poorest are most affected by dictatorial government policies during the seventies Emergency and hence value freedom much more than the elite. In Kiran Desai’s *The*
Inheritance of Loss, the Gorkha movement of the 1980s focuses on the scourge of poverty in backward areas which fuels class-wars, separatist insurgencies or illegal emigration to foreign lands. In The Solitude of Emperors, David Davidar makes Noah - a pariah keeper of graveyards sacrifice his life for protecting the communal harmony of his town from fundamentalist politicians. The theme of poverty in twenty-first century India is taken up by Vikas Swarup’s Q&A - the tale of a slum kid’s inspiring struggle for a better future. In the same vein, Swarup’s Six Suspects takes the reader through life in the slums and chawls of India’s metropolises wherein appalling poverty and unimaginable wealth co-exist in close proximity. Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger captures the class-war effectively even as the penniless protagonist murders his rich exploitative master to make it big in life and declares that in the new India crime alone can lead to success for the have-nots. The overall impression of the pathos of the poor who contribute to nation-building but find themselves crushed by and forced into an unequal war with the ruling elite, continues in Arun Joshi’s The City and The River. Some of the novelists use the master-servant relationship to effectively capture the class-conflict and a comparative study highlights the changing mutual equations between the rich and the poor. For instance, the servility, loyalty and forbearance of the humiliated and exploited servants like Velutha or Vellya Pappen in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things or the Cook and Biju in Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss, which are set in the 1960s-1980s, changes in the novels set in contemporary times, to violent outbursts against the master class as seen in driver Balram Halwai in Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger or in petty thief Munna Mobile in Vikas Swarup’s Six Suspects.

The national role of the suppressed womanhood is dealt with by almost all the novelists, especially the women writers. The overall impression is that despite suffering tremendously in a patriarchal society, women rise to the occasion and act as nurturers and as catalysts of positive change during crisis. In India of the 1960s-1980s, if Ammu and her daughter Rahel in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things defy unjust societal norms in favour of personal liberty, Sai in Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss bravely attempts to retain hope and compassion as the social fabric is torn apart by the gory Gorkha insurgency. In the nineties, Meher Pestonji’s heroine Pervez inspired by her feminist friends almost single-handedly fights ruthless communalists. Manjula Padmanabhan’s Escape portrays the plight of women in India where female foeticide is widespread and also the contemporary feminist fight against an oppressive state as Meiji struggles for survival in a land where women are exterminated. In the other novels by male writers – Gurcharan Das’ A Fine Family has the
inspiring figures of Bhabo who sustains her family during the Partition, Tara who educates her son to contribute to nation-building and Priti who maturely faces the Emergency. Dina Dalal, the poor Parsi widow in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* shows remarkable grit as she stands up to government onslaughts during the Emergency. Shabnam Saxena the actress in Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A* and Sara the activist in Tarun Tejpal’s *The Story Of My Assassins* represent the struggles of the modern Indian woman for personal liberation and socio-political reform. In Arun Joshi’s *The City and The River*, the Head of the Boatmen stands as a feminine symbol of resistance to state tyranny.

With regard to the portrayal of lower castes, in Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, a family of Dalits is seen bravely subverting the oppressive caste hierarchy, struggling for basic human rights and paying with their lives for the same. In Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the untouchable Velutha pays the price for loving an upper-caste woman but his silent defiance and dignity in the face of social and state oppression does not go unnoticed.

The plight of the minorities and those victimised by the mingling of religion and politics is seen across the novels – whether it is the Hindu minority in Pakistan at the time of partition as in Gurcharan Das’ *A Fine Family* or the Muslim minority in India around the same time in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*. The trauma of the Sikh community in the state-backed anti-Sikh riots of 1984 following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi finds place in *A Fine Balance*. Meher Pestonji’s *Pervez – A Novel* and David Davidar’s *The Solitude of Emperors* narrate the sufferings of Muslims and Hindus, Parsis and Christians during the Ayodhya crisis and after the demolition of the Babri Masjid resulting in nationwide riots in the 1990s and in Gujarat in 2002. The role of the Parsi community in national life, its achievements, failures and sufferings are reflected by the two Parsi novelists Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance*) and Meher Pestonji (*Pervez – A Novel*). The spectre of communalism casts its shadow in Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A* and Tarun Tejpal’s *The Story Of My Assassins* which also has a poignant rendering of the partition.

Among other subalterns, exiles, displaced, tribals, children and criminals also find place in the selected novels. In Gurcharan Das’ *A Fine Family*, three generations of a family of refugees battered by the Partition build their lives and a new nation. The displaced and their suffering at the hands of colonisers, native governments, separatists and the elite is a part of Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* - whether it is the Gorkhas, the non-Nepalis or illegal Indian immigrants in the US. Swarup’s *Six Suspects* depicts the indigenous tribal
communities whose habitat and livelihood are destroyed by government policies and unscrupulous businessmen. The child-citizen is one of the concerns in Vikas Swarup’s Q&A and in Tarun Tejpal’s The Story Of My Assassins where the plight of slum-children, street-kids or child labourers battered by the police machinery and by criminal gangs, is a sorry comment on the way the future of the nation is treated. Even in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things society, religion and political and government machinery are shown to be cruel to innocent children. Finally, Tarun Tejpal in The Story Of My Assassins dissects the lives of men forced into crime by poverty and oppression. Compared to the political leaders of the state, the criminal appears to be an innocent pawn in power-games.

7.2.4. The Role of Literature in National Life –

The select novels draw attention to the role of literature in national life. Objectively narrating a nation like India which defies definition, is an enormous challenge. The selected novelists reflect national changes and the myriad ways in which they shape the character and destiny of individuals. They portray how the individual is often hunted down by history and politics, but also rises to the occasion by fighting actively or passively against dark forces. They dismantle the grand paradigms of history by giving shape and identity to the eternally silenced heirs to suffering. They reiterate a belief in the ultimate triumph of the human spirit. At the same time, they also point to the failures of citizens, especially the decline of honesty, industry and altruism and their replacement by unabashed materialism. They trace national failures to changing value systems and advocate a return to integrity in personal and public lives. If Gurcharan Das and Tarun Tejpal attempt to explicate the philosophy of detached action, Rohinton Mistry emphasises on maintaining a fine balance between hope and despair and Arun Joshi advocates selfless striving towards an ideal society and submission to Divine Providence. Again, the protagonists in all novels show a conscious preference for adhering to their moral convictions and refuse to submit to dark forces, though they pay a great. Against the backdrop of increasing state controls, these novels espouse rule by wisdom and ideals. While they demonstrate that unethical progress is self-destructive, they also emphasize the responsibility of citizens in ensuring that governments work for human welfare.

These novelists demonstrate how creative writing can capture those finer socio-political truths that often remain hidden. Such strong stances and truthful representations of history necessitate the liberation of intellectual enterprise from fears and pressures. Committed to suffering humanity, they painfully and rebelliously bare the ugliness of contemporary reality,
expose the fractured myth of the nation and seek to identify the unity underlying its paradoxes. They thus formulate a counter-narrative of liberation, a new humanism, which is universal in scope and not merely national. Each novel is a 'testimonio' drawing on the felt experiences and memories of the novelist. For instance, Gurcharan Das draws on his memories of childhood and youth about freedom, partition, the Nehruvian era and the Emergency. Both Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai base their novels on their childhood years in Kerala and the North-East of the 1960s to 1980s. Meher Pestonji recalls her own experiences as anti-communalism activist in riot-hit Bombay of the 1990s. Tarun Tejpal's brave fight with the Indian state through his sensational Tehelka exposes in the new millennium pervades his novel.

Finally, each of the selected novelists is actively concerned with social, political and national issues. For instance, Gurcharan Das, a former entrepreneur has been writing much serious non-fiction dealing with varied national issues and takes a clear stance on the path to be followed by state and citizen for socio-economic growth. He has actively campaigned for economic and institutional reforms. Rohinton Mistry, though living in Canada has constantly followed and been engrossed with national events - past and present. Arundhati Roy has metamorphosed into a fiery social activist often subversive in her espousal of public movements of the marginalised against the government machinery. Kiran Desai, a diasporic writer, shows keen awareness of the plight of illegal, impoverished Indian immigrants. Meher Pestonji has been active in social work for women and children, in journalism and in fighting communal politics. David Davidar's years as a journalist have given him a close view of national realities. Vikas Swarup a top diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service shows a keen empathy for the deprived. Aravind Adiga's views and lifestyle make his preference for the subaltern citizens of India clear. Tarun Tejpal is an investigative journalist who runs a news organization devoted to exposing corruption in high places. Manjula Padmanabhan's feminist and pro-Third World concerns are well-known while the late Arun Joshi devoted his art to resolving the mental and spiritual traumas of a nation in transition. They intend to employ their art to disturb the conscience of the nation. In fact, some of them like Gurcharan Das and Arundhati Roy have made a conscious move from fiction to non-fiction in order to address national issues more effectively.

Nayantara Sahgal, the famous political novelist opines, “...in our own era the line between public and private has been a continually disappearing one, as vast numbers of people have had to face the traumatic consequences of public events in their private lives....When politics
enters daily life, those who write, among others, are forced to take sides, and it becomes impossible to separate politics from literature or any other department of life. In such an environment literature would be floating in a void if it did not enter the arena” (Sahgal 2-3). As novelist Allan Sealy put it, ‘India is dictating, the country is doing the “thinking”. We do not write but are written’ (qtd. in Mee 35). The Indian novel in English has come of age by collapsing the distinction between the private and the public, using pluralistic personal narratives to capture real India and demonstrating effectively and innovatively how history intersects with private lives and realism blends with fantasy.

7.3. In Prospect –

To sum up, this study offers certain significant and interesting prospects about personal and national destinies in independent India.

In the new world order that worships profit, both personal and national lives are being deprived of moral and spiritual dimensions. The machinery of democracy has been made to conform to the rich and mighty. The weak and less privileged live in a state of deep despair. This proves right Michael Bakunin’s scathing indictment of the state - "The State is the organized authority, domination, and power of the possessing classes over the masses . . . . . There is no horror, no cruelty, sacrilege or perjury, no imposture, no infamous transaction, no cynical robbery, no bold plunder or shabby betrayal that has not been or is not daily being perpetrated. . . "for reasons of state” (qtd in. Chomsky, For Reasons Of State epigraph).

The same global trend seems to be repeated in India. The government machinery is not very tolerant of genuine non-violent civil disobedience as seen in several instances ranging from the Narmada valley to Manipur to Bhopal and Kashmir where citizens protest official acts of omission or commission, or in the response of the state machinery to the outrage over massive scams in the public sector, or even the mass protests against nuclear power plants in several regions. Agriculture, education and healthcare sectors languish dismally while caste and gender discrimination flourish. The ruling elites have stealthily promoted reforms facilitating accumulation of wealth by new elite which is dismissive of mass-based electoral democracy. Conditions are still non-conducive for real democracy and except for electoral voting, the partnership of the masses is absent in decision-making. The backlashes from the dominant state often force the dispossessed into militancy. The Maoist insurgency is a reaction to the appalling oppression and exploitation of peasants, lower castes and tribals by state-backed elites. Nevertheless, Indian democracy still shows considerable depth and
vitality and the weapon of the vote is cherished by the masses. There is a struggle between repressive state agencies controlled by corporates and the various movements on the part of the subaltern to carve out a just and pluralistic nation. Whether it is the struggle against felling trees in the forests of Garhwal and Kumaon, or against bauxite mining in the tribal belt of Gandhamardhan hills in Orissa, or that against commercial fishing trawlers off the coast of Kerala, whether it is the Narmada anti-big dam agitation or the recent long march in October 2012 by farmers from all over the country whose lands have been grabbed by vested interests - all these convey a message in favour of sustainable and decentralised development, underpinned by a belief in participatory democracy. The recent national outrage over the brutal gang-rape and murder of a young student in Delhi in December 2012 signifies not only the widespread violence against and oppression of women but also their valiant struggle for equal rights as citizens. The growing debate over measures such as the Lokpal Bill to check corruption, and, the various civil society organisations like Anna Hazare’s India Against Corruption or Arvind Kejriwal’s Aam Aadmi Party, demanding accountability from those in public office, are redeeming features, an attempt to reform the system from within rather than overthrowing it. A recent article in The Hindu lamented that as protestors storm bastions of power in the capital demanding laws to end political corruption and government tyranny, the nation is caught between an intolerant, insensitive political-government class and mobs baying for instant justice (Subrahmaniam, The Hindu).

Noted sociologist T.K.Oommen identifies the ten major areas of concern for the Indian nation-state as follows- 1) Unfinished political consolidation, 2) Cultural estrangement, 3) Social discrimination, 4) Cultural insulation / destruction of cultural identity, 5) Extreme disparity, 6) Political centralisation, 7) Incipiency of civil service, 8) Consumerism, corruption and criminalisation, 9) Rural-urban divide, and 10) Environmental degradation(Oommen 196). Added to this is failure of electoral politics, decline of public institutions, communalism, regionalism and commercialisation of media. The onus lies as much on the citizen as on the government to ensure a positive collaboration between the personal and the national in order to ensure a brighter destiny for India. Mere institutions, representation and elections do not ensure the success of democracy. Indian democracy needs to grow organically as part of its society and to be judged by citizens using the stringent criteria of all-inclusive social welfare. The full promise of democracy shall be realised only when the social movements of the disadvantaged assume full political effectiveness. There is a need for the Indian institutions of governance to be more sensitive and adaptable to the
society they are embedded in. Political parties need to be well-organised and free from centrism and populism. India needs a ‘strong’ state that can accommodate popular empowerment and decentralization with curbing of all divisive and violent forces, rapid economic growth with social justice, which would enforce rule of law and be tough on corruption. The need of the hour is to reform and reinvigorate the existing state institutions while creating fresh structures to harness mass energies. The Indian polity needs genuinely patriotic leaders and mechanisms to directly enforce policies preferred by the electorate. Nevertheless, governmental institutions are no better than the men and women who operate them. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the framer of the Indian Constitution had warned: “If the Constitution of India gets derailed, the reason will not be that we had a bad Constitution. What we will have to say is that man was vile” (qtd.in Kapur and Mehta 22).

In the final analysis, despite immense social churning and threatening forces of divisiveness, India has succeeded gloriously in keeping alive her cosmopolitan unity and diversity. India’s secular, democratic and federal multi-party system has been its greatest success story. There has been massive expansion in almost all sectors and with high growth rates India stands to play a major role in the world economy. On the other hand, the greatest danger to India’s unity is posed by economic disparities and by communal and culturally homogenizing forces. Also, the poorest millions have little ability to hold their rulers accountable. The noble legacy of the freedom struggle has seen India survive in spite of all the failures and dark prophesies. India is an ancient civilisation and a young nation-state. India has shown that it can contain several narratives, cultures and nations within itself. India’s success as a nation depends on how deep the anti-imperialism, total commitment to secular democracy and the egalitarian, pro-poor orientation of the founding fathers, permeates into state and society. Nevertheless, history will always laud the Indian people for achieving so much and so well, while treading along such a difficult terrain. The story of the forging of the world’s largest democracy, is rich, inspiring and has confronted the established theories of democracy and nationalism. India anticipated the European attempt to create a multilingual, multi-religious, multiethnic, political community. There are miles to go, but, keeping in mind its glorious past, India can proudly take a giant leap forward. The masses have awakened to their power and their experiments and failures will pave the way for a great future.

India symbolises the hopes of mankind for one humane world. The creative energy and leadership, undying faith and hope and the unifying spiritual heritage based on truth, duty and
universal welfare equip the people of India to reach great heights. Ramchandra Guha beautifully portrays the modern Indian nation as *sui generis* and writes, “......the nineteenth century poet Ghalib, thought that God was indeed on the side of India. All around him were conflict and privation, but doomsday had not yet come. ‘Why does not the Last Trumpet sound?’ asked Ghalib....This was the answer he got :

'The Architect...is fond of this edifice
Because of which there is colour in life; He
Would not like it to perish and fall.' ”(Guha 771)

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