Chapter-5

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“Oppression that is clearly inexorable and invincible does not
give rise to revolt but to submission.”

—Simone Weil

Human society is largely characterized by diversity. People are born with
differences, abundance and deprivation. Society also divides and differentiates them
in terms of gender, age, religion, class, colour, physical strength, wealth, educational
achievements etc. Such differentiations often give rise to social inequality which
means different and unequal access for people to social opportunities and privileges,
such as money, power, influence and respect, in relation to their higher or lower
social positions. Society also starts treating its members according to their status.

Social imbalance and inequality are as old as society itself. Our social edifice
has been built in such a way that social inequality has become a hallmark of the
construction. It is so deeply rooted in human minds that it goes on passing down
from generation to generation. In every human society, whether modern or extinct,
power, prestige and wealth have remained the predominant dimensions of social
inequalities. According to Marx Weber’s theory of Social Stratification, power is the
ability to impose one’s own will on others with or without their consent and achieve
goals despite opposition from others; prestige relates to the amount of esteem or
honour that goes with social ranking; wealth refers to ownership of property such as
buildings, lands, farms, houses, factories as well as other assets. In every human
society, some people have a greater share of these valued resources and this pattern
of unequal access to social resources gives birth to disharmony and imbalance in the society.

In the context of India “The traditional Hindu society that is compartmentalized in various caste-groups is a social institution dictating superior and lesser-beings among its members.”

This is in fact true of every human society. The superior beings i.e. the rich and the powerful enjoy all the legal and illegal benefits of development process and distribution of resources by the state. But the lesser beings i.e. the disadvantaged and the destitute are victims of naked and subtle forms of deprivation and discrimination. This social inequality becomes a source of oppression, injustice, violence, conflict and tension.

This is a harsh reality of life that in a socially imbalanced and unequal society, the so-called inferior and lesser-beings are dehumanized and degraded through the tools of oppression and suppression on account of their being belonging to the ‘second-sex’ or to the lower class or caste. The term ‘oppression’ generally refers to cruel and unjust exercise of authority or power which includes a wide variety of tortuous activities, atrocities, exploitation and harassment, with a motive to crush and subdue someone physically or mentally or both. The attitude of being deliberately indifferent and to treat somebody in a cruel, unfair and a very harsh way denying them their rights and freedom etc. is also a form of oppression.
According to Marilyne Frye, oppression refers to “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to be the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people.”3

In fact oppression is to be understood not only in terms of situations of simple limits, restrictions or frustration but it takes place when some members of society are unjustly discriminated and excluded on the grounds of their gender, class, colour, caste, race, religion, culture and ethnicity by denying them a fair participation in society and thus are blocked from opportunities to develop and progress. According to Marilyne Frye:

“The experience of oppressed people is that living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction are blocked or booby trapped.”4

Unfortunately, oppression is so deeply ingrained in the culture of human society that it becomes impossible for the oppressed ones to challenge the age long tradition and system of society and seek ways of liberating themselves from the oppressive treatment. The oppressed class generally includes all those people who are exploited, victimized, suppressed, marginalized or psychologically tortured in one form or the other.

Iris Marion Young, outlines five “faces” or types of oppression namely violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness and cultural imperialism.5
Oppression also occurs when one’s ideas, wishes, opinions are suppressed and one’s mind blocked and sealed by preventing it from expanding and expressing. Humiliating, torturing and degrading an individual or a group of people through various methods and creating a sense of fear and anxiety by the use of cruelty, brutality and violence is also oppression. Whatever be the form, oppression, thus, is the limitation of freedom or freedom being taken away altogether. We can also say that oppression can be enforced not by ruler alone but also by the ideology of one’s society. The victim is left with the feeling of being heavily burdened mentally or psychologically, by troubles, adverse conditions and uncontrolled anxiety.

In a society where the oppressed ones are dehumanised and degraded on account of their gender, class, caste and race, a hegemonic or colonial situation takes place which is sustained and perpetuated by means of excessive physical or mental violence, and ruins the victims physically and psychologically. The annihilated and shattered self of the victim of oppression is left in a pathetic state of depression, powerlessness and psychological impotency. The continuous environment of oppression paralyses the victim’s capacity to think, reason and judge. A certain sense of being a ‘non-entity’ and ‘sub-human’ imposes severe narrowness and restrictions on his cognitive power.

Morton Deutsch, a renowned social psychologist, in his article “A Framework for Thinking about Oppression and Conflict”, discusses at length various facets of oppression. He says that as the oppressor suppresses the oppressed one’s needs or desires for physical affection, self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem or self-reliance, the obvious feelings that arouse in the victim are that of
anger, frustration and anxiety. But this is also a bitter reality that a prolonged state of oppression leads to the feeling of guilt, self-hatred and self-abandonment for having possessed these forbidden desires and kept them subdued. Morton Deutsch explains:

“As a result of these processes, submission and obedience to oppressor, as well as depression, are commonly found among the oppressed when they are interacting with oppressors or when they are in oppressive situations.”

Oppression is as old as the humanity itself. Ever since man appeared on this earth, oppression, suppression and exploitation have always made some sections of humanity subject to constant suffering and ultimately depression. As Morton Deusch observes:

“At various periods in history and in different societies, groups and individuals have been treated inhumanly by other humans: slaves by their masters, natives by colonialists, Blacks by Whites, Jews by Nazis, women by men, children by adults, the physically disabled by those who are not, homosexuals by heterosexuals, political dissidents by political authorities, and one ethnic or religious group by another.”

The nature of oppression may differ from time to time and person to person but the end result is always disastrous. It has a damaging impact on a person’s personality and psychology, leading him to the abyss of depression.

The writers who are sensitive to or belong to the subordinate groups or the subalterns have found space to express their feelings and experiences in their creations so that the world could understand the plights of the oppressed ones, and for that reason the depressed ones. The name of Charles Dickens reigns supreme
among the novelists who depicted and protested exploitation, brutality, oppression and suppression of the weaker sections of society like the poor, children, laborers, and factory workers (*Oliver Twist*, 1838). Richard Wright (*The Native Son*, 1940) and Ralph Elison (*Invisible Man*, 1952) wrote about the exploitation and oppression of the Black by the White.

George Orwell’s dystopian science fiction *1984* (1949) shows how an oppressive government can manipulate the people by manipulating the truth and the news.

Indian English novel, during post-Independence period, also became pre-occupied with the study of social evils, social reform and concern for the oppressed people and their upliftment. Mulkray Anand became the champion of the victims of oppression. His novels powerfully expose the oppressive tendency and the vindictive hold of class and caste based discrimination. His novel *Untouchable* (1935) exposes the severity of oppression, exploitation and humiliation that an untouchable boy goes through in a society dominated by the so-called upper class. In *Coolie* (1936), the untold misery inflicted upon the protagonist boy Munnoo sends quiver down the spine. Anita Desai in her novels like *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of a Day* (1980), *Fasting Feasting* (1999) focuses on the theme of oppressed women and their struggle for freedom and autonomy in patriarchal society and culture, demonstrating that patriarchal violence and oppression is complicated by various other axes of power.

Rohinton Mistry also in his novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) deals with this fundamental social evil of oppression towards one’s fellow beings which always
makes some sections of humanity subject to constant anguish and depression. According to Pramod K. Nayar, “Mistry’s fiction is concerned with the great inequalities of the world: between the classes, genders, castes, and official hierarchies. Tormented souls and human beings with little ‘social capability’ such as Gustad and Dinshaw (Such a Long Journey), Om and Ishvar (A Fine Balance) and Nariman Vakeel (Family Matters) are all victims.”

The present chapter is a study of Mistry’s novel A Fine Balance which represents its major and various minor characters as victims of oppression, suppression, and as marginalized by gender, caste, class and tyrant politics. The novel is set in the mid-1970s in India. In 1975, Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency and suspended civil liberties. This forms the backdrop of the novel. The novel tells us how the lives of four ordinary people are overturned by the Emergency, a period of political turmoil, oppression and exploitation. Mistry reconstructs history by portraying through epic realism the characters who experience all types and degrees of injustice, humiliation, violence and oppression.

Widely acclaimed and winner of numerous awards like the Canadian Giller’s Award (1995), the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in fiction (1996) and the Commonwealth Prize (1996), the novel closely depicts oppression and ill-effecting policies formulated by corrupt politicians particularly during the infamous period of the Emergency and highlights the abominable and harsh realities of life like poverty, violence, discrimination and resulting depression.

As already stated, Mistry’s epic novel A Fine Balance is anchored in the post-independent India and more specifically in the days of Indira Gandhi’s rule. It
was a critical time for the nation when Indira Gandhi had declared the state of internal emergency without consultation of her cabinet in 1975. In 1984 the Indian army attacked the golden temple in Amritsar, which caused the death of the Sikh religious leader, Jarnail Bhindranwale, and later in the same year 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguard as vengeance. Jaydipsinh Dodiya explains the subject-matter of the novel:

“A Fine Balance is a microcosm of life in general and political disturbances, which he keenly perceived around him when he was in India. He portrays the bleak realities and horrifying implications of the anarchy and exploitation that could go in the name of discipline, beautification and progress in a democratic country.”

The main action of the novel is framed between the opening chapter entitled ‘Prologue 1975’ and the concluding section ‘Epilogue 1984’. Over a period of ten years, the novel narrates the story of some unlucky people in sixteen chapters. The book opens with the abrupt stoppage of the suburban train service due to a suicide by an unidentified youth and it closes with the similar stoppage of a train service because of a similar reason i.e. suicide by one of the major young aspiring characters who feels so awfully depressed by the circumstances and shattered dreams that he decides to put an end to his life.

Reading this powerful novel, one is swiftly alerted to the oppression haunting the lives of its four major characters. Mistry tactfully portrays the victimization and oppression of Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck Kohlah whose circumstances and fates become unexpectedly and inextricably linked with each other in the madness of Bombay. Their backgrounds with loads of horrors,
injustice, woes and miseries are described by the use of flashback technique which enables the novelist to co-ordinate different events and incidents scattered here and there in this big and bulky novel. Each of these characters becomes representative of the suffering of the ordinary citizen in India of the 1970’s. According to B. Indira’s observation:

“The novel, *A Fine Balance*, shows how political changes mercilessly cut through the psycho-social fabric of the country where justice is sold to the highest bidder. Caught in the cross-currents of frenzied political changes, even the simplest wishes of a square meal a day and a wife to carry on the family are shattered.”

The novel is made up of three major narrative strands: the story of Dina Dalal, a pretty widow in her forties who refuses to remarry and struggles hard to earn a meager income as a seamstress and lead an independent life in Mumbai; the story of two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, the tanner-cobbler uncle and nephew, who come to the city in the hope of finding work, and struggle to exist in the world; and the story of Maneck Kohlah, a sensitive Parsi student, from a village at the foothills of Himalayas, who comes to the city for study and falls a prey to ragging. They all find themselves thrown together in the same humble shabby city apartment in Mumbai. The tailors have come in search of work and Maneck for paying guest accommodation to complete his education at a technical college in Mumbai.

All the protagonists are introduced in the opening chapter ‘Prologue: 1975’. They are from different places and background, but all of them experience the various trials of human condition such as death of family members and friends, financial crisis, oppression of different kinds and levels. Through the depiction of
their unending struggles, untold misery and unlimited pains and sorrows, Mistry highlights the harsh reality of life that a continuous state of oppression badly shatters one’s confidence, sense of pride and crushes the personality of the victim. Jaydipsinh Dodiya observes:

“The novel is (also) the story of the heroic struggle of Dina Dalal and her two tailors to survive a world of segregation, oppression and corruption in which honest work is denied and punished by a totalitarian system. Ishvar and Omprakash, the uncle and nephew who have come to the City by the Sea (metropolis) primarily to escape the casteist oppression imposed on them by the village landlord in their Village by a River.”

We meet the feisty heroine of the novel Dina Shroff in the opening chapter and learn how she spent a middle class existence with her brother and parents in the City by the Sea in India. She suffers the death of her parents in succession at her younger age. Thereafter Dina, a lover of humour and independent existence is guarded by her autocratic brother Nusswan who wants to protect her as a bird in a cage and uses her as his personal slave. She is forced to leave school at fourteen; denied her right of having a university education. She is harassed by her brother to marry rich but unappealing suitors. Though Parsi community is known for valuing the notion of liberty and independence, but here in this context when Dina becomes the victim of patriarchal oppression, we understand that people are not always oppressed by cruel tyrants with bad intentions alone. Oppression creates injustice in other circumstances as well. In many cases, a well-intentioned liberal society can place system-wide constraints on groups and limit their freedom.
In Dina’s case, we notice a lot of social imbalance and oppression that push her into a subordinate position within the family due to untimely death of her wealthy parents. In order to avoid her brother’s rages and to feed her free and independent spirit, the defiant and vibrant Dina spends a lot of time in exploring parks, museums, libraries and markets. She discovers a series of concerts where she meets a fellow independent spirit, Rustom Dalal. The couple falls in love and much to the chagrin of her acutely class-conscious brother Nusswan, Dina marries Rustom Dalal, a mere compounder. They are a happy couple, but happiness eludes Dina as Rustam is killed in a bicycle accident on their third wedding anniversary, leaving Dina alone.

Circumstances compel her to move back to her childhood home with her brother and his family. Nusswan tries hard to persuade Dina to remarry and affiliate herself again with a man But Dina has been portrayed by Mistry as a woman with a fierce sense of purpose and identity. She has been considered by John Ball as “a person of dynamic agency, possessive of a sophisticated and believable interior life.”

The moment Nusswan asks her, “do you prefer to live forever on my charity?” Dina, instead of becoming dependent on her brother for shelter and financial assistance, decides to move back to the flat she shared with her husband Rustom. (FB 52)

This marks the beginning of Dina’s continued and long struggle to survive in a world of oppression and exploitation, trying to avoid seeking help from her brother. In order to keep on in the same apartment hired by her husband and to make
both ends meet she tries hard at everything from hair-cutting to knitting and embroidery, and finally sewing. But when her eyesight begins to fail, she is forced to find other ways of making her both ends meet. After being an independent seamstress around the city for a while, she eventually starts her own business; starts working for Mrs. Gupta of Au Revoir and hires two tailors Ishvar and Om as employees to do the sewing at her flat, though she must conceal them from the landlord’s rent collector. She keeps Maneck as her paying guest which provides her a little extra income. Maneck feels depressed at the sight of Dina’s poverty-stricken and decaying rented apartment:

“Everywhere there was evidence of her struggle to stay ahead of squalor, to mitigate with neatness and order the shabbiness of poverty. He saw it in the chicken wire on the broken windowpanes, in the blackened kitchen wall and ceiling, in the flaking plaster, in the repairs of her blouse collar and sleeves” (FB 200)

This is a harsh reality of life that women are exploited and oppressed because of the patriarchal molded structured. They are expected to rely on men for money, shelter, protection, and often for emotional security. However Mistry in his novel allows Dina, a widow, to become fiercely independent. Fighting alone with her struggles, sorrows and poverty, she develops a strong sense of self-preservation and mistrust. This is a bitter truth that after the death of a husband, income naturally decreases and a widow faces economic catastrophe and there are chances of a widow being cheated by those pretending to help unless she is careful and intelligent in self-management. K. Ratna Shiela Mani explains Dina’s hard life:

“Dina’s story is one of struggle— struggle to safeguard her fragile independence from her autocratic brother Nusswan; and protect her flat from her
rapacious landlord. Her story is symbolic of the rebellion of the young women against their subjection.”

In addition to fighting with the financial problems, Dina has also to deal with loneliness and emotional emptiness that has created a vacuum around her since the death of her husband. Also the socio-political disturbances of the time make her suffer all the more. Her all hopes and dreams for a better future are shattered indirectly by the State of Emergency, a period of oppression, suppression, exploitation, corruption, tyranny and violence because it directly affected the lives of Dina’s tailors Ishvar and Om in an inexplicably tragic and horrible way. She is forcefully evicted from her flat by the landlord’s goons. Her fragile route to independence and attempts to fight against family and societal subordination is obstructed. She becomes utterly helpless and is pushed again to her brother’s concern and family dependence she had earlier refused. She loses her identity in the society as an independent woman.

Dina’s life is thus full of struggles and fights for individuality and independence but the continual state of oppression, threats, harassments and failures by the patriarchal society makes her surrender and accept her second class and subordinate position in the society in the end. According to John Ball’s observation Dina “is a woman whose successes are of her making, [and] whose failures stem, with one prime-ministerial exception, from the blinkered oppression and cruelties of men.”

She is the subject of her brother Nusswan’s dominance, cruelty and oppression at home. She wanted to be a doctor just like her father, and was bright
and capable enough to materialize her dream. But when Nusswan takes charge of the home after their father Dr. Shroff’s death on one of his mission trips to a remote area, Dina had to become a household drudge. There was no question of further schooling.

This, in fact, is a harsh reality that we confront in our society that a large number of girls miss out on the education they need or wish to have. Girls are kept deprived of pursuing their dreams and complete their education on various pretexts. Apart from the safety issues and infrastructural barriers, the expectations of domesticity play a major role in forced discontinuation of girls’ education. According to a survey by Harvard School of Public Health, girls in India drop out of school because they are expected to contribute to the household far younger than boys — the implicit understanding being that a girl is being trained for a role as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law whereas boys are being trained for an occupation. Girls get married younger than boys do. These causes are ingrained in our system and are larger than education.

The most horrifying acts of oppression, discrimination and the state of Emergency are felt by Ishvar and Om in the novel. Mistry’s socialist sympathy with the poor, the downtrodden and the outcast find a larger canvas in A Fine Balance. In order to describe the world of the poor, there are many tangents to the main narrative of the tailors, itself a story of horrors.

The focus of the greater part of the plot of the novel is the incessant and horrible ordeal of Dina’s tailors, Ishvar and Om. The youthful Om and his uncle Ishvar originally belong to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers. The
long narration of their family history in the section entitled ‘In a Village by a River’ serves to deepen and strengthen our sympathy for these two characters and allows Mistry to deal with those who are twice disempowered. Om and Ishvar in the novel “are disempowered in the city as representatives of the rural poor encountering the senselessness and cruelty of the city. They are also disempowered rural inhabitants as representatives of the family of tanners, the untouchables who have dared challenge the dictates of caste difference and oppression (to begin with, by choosing a profession different from the one ‘ordained’ for them by their caste).”

Through the story of Ishvar’s father Dukhi mochi and his family, Mistry brings out, with devastating effect, the unfathomable levels of oppression, tyranny and cruelty that humans can inflict upon their fellow beings. We come across several instances of horrendous consequences of caste and class oppression in the novel. Chopping off fingers for an unjust accusation or losing a hand or wrist for the same, being severely whipped for getting too close to the well, melted lead poured into the ears, murder at the drop of a hat, forced to eat human shit on getting late for cleaning, women being shaved and walked through the square for refusing to go to the field with zamindar’s son— all blood-curdling and shameful acts are commonplace. Besides tanning and leather working, “Dukhi learned what it was to be a Chamaar, an untouchable in village society . . . Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system smeared everywhere.” (FB 96)

This is a bitter truth that oppression based upon caste-inequality exists in India since the pre-independence days to the present. One’s birth is not within one’s
control but there is no denying the fact that a large segment of Indian population is oppressed, segregated and subjected to inhuman treatment merely for being born in the so-called lowly classes. Mistry recounts in the novel the incidents of oppression and tyranny let loose on the lower-caste people by the higher-caste ones. The Thakurs and Pandits in the village try “to whip the world into shape” by flogging the lower-caste people for varied and imaginative crimes: “a Bhungi had dared to let his unclean eyes meet Brahmin eyes; a Chamaar had walked on the wrong side of the temple road and defiled it; another had strayed near a puja that was in progress and allowed his undeserving ears to overhear the sacred shlokas; a Bhungi child had not erased her footprints cleanly from the dust in a Thakur’s courtyard after finishing her duties there— her plea that broom was worn thin was unacceptable.” (FB 101)

By the time Dukhi entered his teens he “had acquired all the knowledge he would need to perceive that invisible line of caste he could never cross, to survive in the village like his ancestors, with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions.” (FB 97) Like others of his community, Dukhi also is dependent on the landowning class of Thakurs for myriad chores as employment. He would accept whatever is paid to him. Once, after several idle days, he was grateful to be sent for Thakur Premji, for crushing dry red chilies and complete the task by sunset. By the late afternoon, when the sack of chilies was almost empty, an accident occurred. As the pestle landed and rebounded the way it had been doing all the day, the mortar split cleanly in two and collapsed with one part landing on his foot and crushing it. Unmindful of Dukhi’s injury the Thakur beat him up severely with a stick. Such events of oppression and tyranny were quite frequent.
One such episode of oppression follows when Dukhi’s wife Roopa has to steal from orchards of landowners to supplement her baby’s food. In the process, she is forced to give in to the lust of the man who watches the grove (FB 99). Dukhi’s two boys Ishvar and Narayan are whipped mercilessly by the school teacher for daring to venture into the classroom; playing with chalk and board and ‘defiling the tools of learning’ (FB 110). This is the proverbial last straw for Dukhi and he rebels against the system.

Dukhi does not wish that his sons should follow the caste-based occupation because he did not want his children to suffer the ignominy attached to the profession of chamaars. In an attempt to break away from the restrictive caste system, Dukhi mochi who lives in a village sends his two sons Ishvar and Narayan aged 12 and 10, to a Muslim tailor Ashraf chacha in a nearby town to be apprenticed as tailors. Ashraf and his wife Mumtaz, irrespective of community differences, welcome the boys and eventually become their surrogate parents. At this stage Mistry highlights the harsh reality that despite the laws and land reforms, it is very difficult to fight against the deep-rooted caste system in India.

Community violence is another harsh reality that India faced as an after-effect of Independence. Ishvar was about seventeen years old when violence against Muslims in the country broke out. Muslims were slaughtered and their homes and shops were burned to ground. When Ashraf Chacha’s shop is attacked by such violence, Ishvar and Narayan save his family and the shop with their courage and wisdom. Ishvar stays with Ashraf Chacha to help him in his work. He attains maturity and turns a grown up.
When Narayan comes back to the village as an accomplished tailor, “it was uncertain if centuries of tradition could be overturned easily.” (FB 132) Narayan starts getting a good clientele, builds a new hut, gets married with a beautiful girl Radha, and begets a son Omprakash and two daughters. Omprakash in the company of Ishvar undergoes training in tailoring at Ashraf chacha’s place in the town. The self-esteemed Narayan does not work for the upper-caste and class and often avoids them. All this makes the upper class people jealous. Though it was an individual decision of Dukhi to train his sons as tailors but it was something intolerable to the landowning class, as such a step was sure to make the low-caste people independent as it had made Narayan who was now looked upon as the spokesman and unelected leader of the Chamaar community in the village. He was not a person to accept and give in to oppression. He goes much ahead of his father who had committed the crime of changing cobblers into tailors. The cobbler turned tailor Narayan, tries to revolt against the existing order of the village.

In a conversation with his father Dukhi, Narayan gives vent to his pain at the oppression of lower class people by the high class Thakurs and Pandits:

“I was just thinking that . . . thinking how nothing changes. Years pass and nothing changes. . . Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals . . . More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like.” (FB 142) But Dukhi is afraid of his son’s revolutionary ideas because he understands that one has to pay to afford the luxury of such views in a village where a mere hint of a diversion from meaningless traditions and customs bear extremely violent
consequences for the submissive, modest and mute lower caste communities. He says, “Son, those are dangerous things to want. You changed from Chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that.” (FB 143)

Mistry underlines the harsh reality that people are befooled year after year by the political hypocrisy. Elections are campaigned and fought by sycophancy and false promises by the political leaders. As Mistry describes that at the time of parliamentary election in the village:

“The speeches were crammed with promises of every shape and size: promises of new schools, clean water, and health care; promises of land for landless peasants, through redistribution and stricter enforcement of Land Ceiling Act; promises of powerful laws to punish any discrimination against, and harassment of, backward castes by upper castes; promises to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati, dowry system, child marriage.” (FB 143) The fact about these promises is uttered through Dukhi when he says,

‘There must be a lot of duplication in our country’s laws. Every time there are elections, they talk of passing the same ones passed twenty years ago. Someone should remind them they need to apply the laws.’

‘For politicians, passing laws is like passing water,’ said Narayan. ‘It all ends down the drain.’ (FB 143)

Booth capturing is another grim reality of our so-called democratic election system, the horrifying and monstrous consequences of which Mistry presents through the heart-rending end Narayan and his family meet. Narayan’s rebellious
mood gets expression when he wants to assert his right to vote for a candidate of his choice by insisting on marking his own ballot in the booth. Thakur Dharamsi who has got the polling booth captured, gets furious. He orders his men to take Narayan and other two men, who are in favour of Narayan, to his farm. We can feel the extreme of naked brutality and physical oppression in the torture that Thakur Dharamsi’s *goondas* inflict upon them. At Dharamsi’s farm, throughout the day, at intervals, they are flogged mercilessly as they hang naked by their ankles from the branches of a banyan tree. The details of torture, surpassing all the limits of human behavior, send a quiver down the spine. Thakur’s “men urinated on the three inverted faces. . . the parched mouths were grateful for the moisture, licking the trickle with feeble urgency . . . In the evening, after the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals are held up to the three men’s genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still silent bodies were taken down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks and three were hanged. The bodies are displayed in the village square.” (FB 146) Not satisfied with this alone, Thakur Dharamsi orders his *goondas* to begin working their way towards the untouchable quarters as he wants “those achhoot jatis to learn a lesson.” Mistry narrates the intensity of oppression: “They beat up individuals at random in the streets, stripped some women, raped others, burned a few huts.” (FB 146)

As if this much crudeness and barbarity is not enough, Dukhi, Roopa, Radha and their daughters are made captives, dragged into the main room and are brought before Narayan’s mutilated body. “The naked corpse’s face was burnt and broken blur. Only by the red birthmark on his chest could they recognise Narayan.” (FB
Even before the family could bemoan enough the merciless murder, the Thakur’s men burn all of them alive to set an example for the entire achhoot community. Mistry presents the position of the sub-altern in the historical context and projects Thakur Dharamsi as a symbol of tyranny, exploitation and oppression who believes that Dukhi deserved the punishment as he committed the unforgivable crime of forgetting place in the hierarchical order:

“What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder: he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society’s timeless balance— Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with utmost severity, said the Thakur.” (FB 147)

The Thakur had intended to burn alive the entire family but Ishvar and Narayan’s son Omprakash lived on as they were in the city with Ashraf Chacha. By the time they heard the sad news in the town, the ashes had cooled, and charred bodies were broken and dispersed into the river. To add more misery, helplessness and shock to their grief, they were discouraged to file an F.I.R. After a reluctant investigation, the police reported that allegations of arson and murder against Thakur Dharamsi were baseless. The police sub-inspector threatened and frightened them away saying:

“What kind of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filthy achhoot castes are always out to make trouble! Get out before we charge you with public mischief!” (FB 148)

Here Mistry hints at a common and bitter fact that very often not even FIR’s against the influential people are registered, let alone the action against them. The
young Omprakash is full of wrath and outbursts his revengeful thoughts to Ishvar and Ashraf chacha while working at his sewing machine:

“I will gather a small army of Chamaars, provide them with weapons, then march to the landlords’ houses. . . It will be easy to find them. We’ll do it like Naxalites. . . At the end of it we’ll cut off their heads and put them on spikes in the marketplace. Their kind will never dare to oppress our community again.” (FB 149)

Mistry tries to awaken the readers to the brutal reality of the Indian countryside, where the members of the lower castes are treated as worse than animals. This conflict between the upper caste and the lower caste in the novel throws light on the fact that no-balance exists in Indian society.

Ishvar and Omprakash, thus pay the great price of belonging to the mute, conforming lower caste communities, and tragically lose their family in the village. Fortunately, they have a loyal ally Ashraf chacha in the town with whom they live like a family and work together as tailors despite their community differences.

But the rising competition from a newly established ready-made clothing shop in the town force Ishvar and Om to move to a larger city—‘City by the Sea’—where they can hope to get greater prospects of employment.

However, once in the city, Ishvar and Om find that they are just an addition to the masses looking for job and shelter, which are not easy to come by. With their loads of woes and miseries and with their new hopes and dreams of a better future, they initially find shelter under the awning of the shop of Ashraf Chacha’s suspicious friend Nawaz, as a temporary measure. But soon they find out that this
temporary measure will last for six months. Mistry, through the predicament of Om and Ishvar, seeks to highlight the harsh reality that millions of Mumbai’s citizens are forced to lead a homeless and unemployed life. According to Nandini B. Dewnarain:

“This is one novel that allows Mistry to present the tragic beauty of the city of Bombay and venture out into the rural horrors of India’s oppressive caste system.”

After six months’ incessant search, it is at Dina’s flat that they find a job. Here they start a new journey without knowing that emergency lies ahead.

During the emergency the students of the college were forced to move and so Maneck Kohlah moves to Dina’s place as a paying guest and meets the tailors and Dina. A sense of rootlessness, loneliness, social circumstances bring these four characters together who are struggling for survival and identity in their own different ways. All of them believe that the word ‘emergency’ is a sort of political game played by the people in power and would not affect ordinary people like Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om. But Mistry tactfully discusses in the novel how Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s decision to impose a ‘State of Internal Emergency’ proves to be fatal for ordinary people. By the time Ishvar and Om reach Bombay, the state of the Emergency has already been declared. Nandini Bhautoo Dewnarain states:

“Om and Ishvar are born to a perpetual state of emergency. Their experience takes them from the caste preoccupations of their village, to the town of Ashraf Chacha to experience communal riots and from there to further to the double emergency of precarious urban existence and political Emergency.”
A Fine Balance is a fine documentation of human dimensions of the Emergency. The novel is intensely political and presents law and politics as the chief instrument of political oppression. The two tailors represent the common humanity as they endure the consequences of all political measures decided in the higher echelons of power. The next shelter they get after Nawaz’s awning is the slum quarter, a poor shack which is hardly any comfort but ensures a roof over the head. The shack is sublet to them by an agent who makes illegal constructions by manipulating state lands. Apart from homelessness, unemployment and utter poverty, Mistry in the section ‘Small Obstacles’ underlines the harsh reality that those who can manipulate state lands and use their influence, try to make profits and draw hard-earned money from the poor dwellers. This is a common sight in metropolitan cities where illegal shacks are erected and rented out to the desperate. At the jhopadpatty, Ishvar and Om encounter for the first time the horrendous experiences of the poor city migrant. They have to interact with a curious and poverty-stricken group of people. It is here that they experience water shortage, the dire poverty of those even worse off than them, like the Monkey-man who cannot leave his animals alone for fear they will devour each other out of hunger, the hair-collector Rajaram who collects hair from barbers’ shops to save himself from starvation, and the poor battered woman with five children to feed.

One of the consequences of living in the illegal slum quarter is that Ishvar and Om become easy targets for political parties seeking crowds “much easier to get them wholesale in the city jhopadpattis” to attend political rallies. (FB 261) In the chapter ‘Day at the Circus, Night in the Slum’, Mistry shows how individual lives become victims of oppression by politics and law. Ishvar and Om, along with all the
slum-dwellers are forcibly loaded onto the buses and bundled away to one such rally of the Prime Minister to fill in the number. They were promised five rupees, tea and snacks. Ishvar wonders ‘if the Prime Minister knows they are forcing us’, to which the hair-collector Rajaram replies:

‘She only knows important things. . . Things her friends want her to know.’ (FB 259)

Rajaram’s reply reflects the harsh reality of the politics of hypocrisy, oppression, violence and exploitation. The shadowy presence of Mrs. Indira Gandhi is felt in the precise description of the political rally and the behaviour of the politicians. A local politician prostrate before the Prime Minister on the stage, with the whole crowd watching. Rajaram remarks: “I told you it’s going to be a day at circus — we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything.” (FB 263)

The Prime Minister and other leaders deliver speeches in justification of Emergency and explain how they are making efforts for the welfare and benefit of common people. Ironically, the bitter reality is that it is the common people like Ishvar, Om and the slum-dwellers, who have to return with neither the promised tea, nor free bus ride, and awfully exhausted and hungry-thirsty. Moreover whole of their earning of the day is also lost at the rally. Ishvar worries: “We could have stitched six dresses, thirty rupees lost.” (FB 207) Next day Dina, who had taken their absence as a usual sign of arrogance of the labour class, once their meal is assured, gives them a piece of advice: “Better tell the Prime Minister your jobs are in danger if she takes you again to a meeting.” (FB 274)
The absolute alienation of the forced audience from the political discourse, masquerade of fawning politicians and various gimmicks to get applause from the crowd is made clear in the comments and activities of the people at the rally. Amidst the total disinterest of the audience, the Prime Minister outlines the Twenty-Point Programme, through which she expresses her wish to: provide houses for the poor; control population growth; and eliminate poverty from cities, towns and villages. “This episode is”, comments Nandini Bhautoo Devnarain, “by authorial choice, an occasion to describe the idiosyncratic exaggeration those in power indulge in. It is one of the occasions that serve, once again, to show that description — even when it is seemingly neutral and objective — can be a weapon for incisive political commentary.”

Unknown to Om and Ishvar, the Twenty-Point Programme will have a direct impact upon their lives. Rather than adopting a humane approach in tackling the problems, oppression, coercion, tyranny are used to achieve the objectives in the course of the narrative, as it was in historical reality. The implementation of the Twenty-Points Programme is almost immediate. A few days after the rally, the tailors return home to find the sorry sight of their hutment colony being flattened by the bulldozers as part of the “City Beautification” plans, much lauded by the complacent middle class. The description of the slum evacuation and destruction shows how the poor were trampled under oppression, tyranny, betrayal and injustice during the period of Emergency:

“The hutment dwellers were massed on the road, fighting to return to their shacks, their cries mingling with the sirens of ambulances that couldn’t get through. The police had lost control for the moment. The residents surged forward, gaining
the advantage. Then the police rallied and beat them back. People fell, were trampled . . . children screamed, terrified at being separated from their parents . . . people were crushed. Blood everywhere. And the police are protecting those murderers.” (FB 295)

Sergeant Kesar who carried out all this, explains what is being done to the disbelieving slum dwellers: “It is our assignment — slum prevention and city beautification...” (FB 303) Mistry brings out the harsh reality expressed in the helpless outrage of anguish of the poor dwellers:

“For the poor there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing, now it’s less than nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go?” (FB 295)

With great difficulty, the tailors are able to retrieve some of their belongings, stuff them in their old trunk, and sinking under its weight wander all over the city in search of a place to live in. There only “good fortune’ is that their sewing machines which they took at rent “have safe home with Dina Bai.” (FB 297)

Ishvar and Om, with a bleak hope, go to Nawaz’s place to seek shelter but are shocked to know that he has been arrested by the police on the pretext of smuggling gold from the Gulf. In fact the poor fellow had committed no crime, but only asked an influential customer for his payment. Mistry, through this instance, brings out the oppression inflicted on common man by the powerful and influential under the guise of MISA that, during Emergency, enabled the government to arrest individuals without declaring charges. As a result all those who opposed to the power were put into jails. This is a well known fact that tens of thousands of politicians from the opposition were arrested under the Defense of India Rules and
the MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act). The tea-stall owner near Nawaz’s place makes a revealing explanation:

“With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There’s even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure.” (FB 299)

With no shelter and no place to sleep, the tailors decide to go to the railway platform, already thick with beggars and itinerants bedding down for the night. But at every step they become the victim of oppression. They are denied sleeping place here too without bribing the policeman on duty. One cannot deny the bitter fact that bribery and corruption prevail in almost every public or private departments. Ishvar and Om soon realise that they must pay the policeman even to sleep on the platform for a night. The policeman makes a hint by jingling coins in his pocket and tells that those who are sleeping undisturbed there “have special permission.” (FB 300) The poor and homeless tailors try to waive, but the greedy policeman empties a bucket of coldwater over the sleeping tailors. Their sad plight is described thus:

“Thoroughly soaked, they picked up everything and moved to the only remaining spot. At the end of the platform, where the urine smell was strong. The dry clothes in the trunk were a precious treasure. They took turns changing. Their wet things were spread out on the trunk’s open lid. The sheets and blanket were hung on a broken sign fixture protruding from the platform wall. The wicker mat dried quickly but they were afraid to lie down. Shivering, they sat guarding their belongings, swaying with sleep, nodding off occasionally.” (FB 301)
Ishvar and Om check place after place but with no luck. Even Dina refuses to accommodate their trunk even for a night. Ironically enough the city is full of a variety of slogans like:

“THE CITY BELONGS TO YOU! KEEP IT BEAUTIFUL”
“FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY! HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS!”
“THE NATION IS ON THE MOVE!” (FB 303)

With great difficulty, they find a place to sleep in a street in front of a chemist shop with the permission of the watchman by paying him two rupees for each night.

The next point of the Programme is yet to be implemented. City Beautification has to be followed by the elimination of poverty. MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act) neatly step in to legally allow the elimination of poverty by giving the representatives of the law the power to arrest the inoffensive beggars. In the next oppressive blow of the Emergency, Ishvar and Om are forcibly lifted from their rented footpath dwelling in the street and taken away to the quarry, a dam construction site along with hordes of beggars and pavement dwellers. Ishvar’s protests that they are not street beggars or urchins are not paid any heed, and they are forced into a truck wherein “underfoot, stray gravel stabbed the human cargo.” (FB 326)

The long episode of Om and Ishvar’s experience at the stone quarry introduces a new series of poverty and oppression. At the site, they are forced into relentless, backbreaking and free labour and treated little better than slaves for several days for reasons beyond their control. The description of terrible conditions
in the quarry that builds on the ‘development’ and ‘poverty elimination’ issue in the novel adds to the sense of unease with oppressive and tyrannical policies of the government.

There seems no escape for Ishvar and Om from the horrible conditions of construction site until the Beggarmaster, who rules the underworld, comes there to augment his work force. He takes the crippled, mutilated or injured workers and trains them to work as beggars. With the help of Beggarmaster’s favourite beggar Shankar, who later turns out to be his step brother, Om and Ishvar succeed in persuading him to get them out of that place.

While Ishvar and Om ‘escape’ through the intervention of the beggar Shankar and Beggarmaster, most of the people that they have encountered will perish in the place under tyranny, exploitation and oppression. The tailors’ ordeal ends; after great hardships, they return to the city. But now their return marks their involvement with a new type of urban subalternity, as beggars, to whom Beggarmaster is a protector. However this is a rented protection. They agree to pay fifty rupees a week per person to Beggarmaster for one year.

Dina offers her verandah to live in when Ishvar and Om return as very haggard, injured and exhausted and in a state of shock. Her attitude towards them undergoes a tremendous change. In the very beginning her relationship with the tailors was one of distrust and tyranny. She never liked Maneck’s socializing with them. Om and Dina were apprehensive about each other’s concerns. Dina forced them to work long hours without knowing that they go without food. Om had also tried to spy on Dina one day, in order to find out the export company so that he
could directly contact them and get orders. But now, after their ordeal in the quarry, she begins to empathise with them. Soon she even starts sharing her kitchen with them. The barrier gradually disappears as the four starts living under the same roof. The bond between the four becomes stronger after the horrific experience of construction plant. Om and Maneck are happy in each other’s company. And Ishvar begins to trust Dina with bits of their past. Sailing under the one flag and getting busy with the quilt making days pass by “as comforting and liquid as a piece of chiffon” between fingers. (FB 185)

But this promise of happiness is to be destroyed soon. Thomas Hardy’s observation of life that “Happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain” seems applicable to the lives of Om and Ishvar. The final blow to their human dignity will take place with the forceful implementation of yet another government policy, sterilization as a mode of population control.

Every description of the notorious period of Emergency in India is incomplete without reference to the ‘family planning camps’. People were so much oppressed under the name of ‘birth control plans’ that it cost the ruling Congress party heavily and it lost the elections when Emergency was revoked. It was quite common for the police to round up common people irrespective of their age, gender or physical condition without any reason. The brutality and extent of oppression and atrocities committed at these camps is presented in the novel as the final and fatal blow to the lives and identities of Ishvar and Om.

Ishvar’s obsession to get his nephew Om married takes them back to Ashraf chacha in the town. While they are roaming in the market with Ashraf, they happen
to pass before the family planning centre. That day was noisier than usual because the Family Planning Centre was promoting its sterilization camp from a booth in the square. Ashraf tells them how callously the sterilization operations are done:

“They set it up like a factory. Cut here, snip there a few stitches — and the goods are ready to be shipped. . . Actually we tailors take more pride in our work. We show more consideration for fabric than these monsters show for human. It is nation’s shame.” (FB 524)

Suddenly several police vans swoop down the market with horns blaring and start picking up people indiscriminately. Irrespective of their age, gender or health — old men, young boys, house-wives with young children— all are forcibly dragged and loaded into the garbage trucks and taken to the sterilization camp. This is the exact representation of oppression under Family Planning programme during Emergency days. The new rules of Emergency made it obligatory for every government officer to encourage a minimum number of people to get sterilized or his promotion would be cancelled. Mistry underlines the harsh reality that any urban development and government measure works in conjunction with the so-called ‘law’ to exploit the poor. According to Nandini Bhautoo Devnarain, “The politics of development is invariably, Mistry suggests, at the cost of humanity.”

In the tumult of market place, Ashraf becomes the victim of physical oppression. He is killed by the severe beating by the police. Ishvar and Om are thrown into a garbage truck and dragged to the sterilization camp where sterilization operation is performed on all — old men, bachelors or even people about to be married, men already sterilized, women past child-bearing age. Mistry shows how
this family planning move proved to be undoing. Both Ishvar and Om are sterilized. Readers are deeply moved to pity when Ishvar begs for mercy and makes repeated requests to the authorities to spare Om as he is bachelor and his marriage is to be solemnized soon:

“Please, Doctorji! Not my nephew! Cut me as much as you like! But forgive my nephew! I beg of you! His marriage is being arranged!” (FB 534)

But all his entreaties remain unheeded. The condition of Ishvar and Om worsens, when compounded with the authorized, organized brutality and oppression of the state, age-old caste oppression and tyranny take over. Mistry goes on to show that the vasectomy drive was also used to eliminate the enemies of the establishment. Even after a gap of several years, Thakur Dharamsi remains powerful and backed up by the government. He is a big man in Congress party with chances to become a minister in next elections. He is now in-charge of a Family Planning Centre. Villagers are helpless before him even today. He even auctions the patients to government employees who are keen on the idea that “targets have to be achieved within the budget.” (AFB 533) He recognizes Dukhi’s grandson and Narayan’s son Om, who instead of giving way, deliberately walked in Dharamsi’s way. As if it was not enough to murder the whole family, he wants to erase any possible future seed of this family which has made an attempt to defy the laws of caste. He wields his influence over the state officials to have him castrated under the pretext of a free operation to save his life. Om’s testicles are removed, reducing him to a status of eunuch. This shocking step by the Thakur shatters Ishvar’s dreams for his nephew. He makes a pathetic cry in extreme depression, “I have let down your dead father!
Our family name will die without children, it’s the end of everything — everything is lost!” (FB 535)

Mistry highlights the shocking reality that the powerful oppressors want not only the weaker oppressed ones but also their offsprings to remain their subservient all their life and follow the same caste system, wherein lies no upliftment of their social status.

It is tragically ironic that it is the same type of suffocating caste oppression and injustice from which Dukhi had tried to save his progeny by not conforming to the practices of his community, and apprenticing his sons as tailors in the town. The battle Dukhi had started against caste oppression three generations ago is lost. Om is castrated; Ishvar’s leg has to be amputated because of the gangrene caused by the insanitary operation he is forced to undergo. He has to remain in the hospital for two months. He cries out to Om, “my life is over, just throw me in the river that runs by our village. I don’t want to be a burden on you.” (FB 542)

The tailors return to Bombay with a little trolley fitted with small wheels for Ishvar and a rope for Om to pull it.

In a society, where the poor and the needy are oppressed continuously on the grounds of caste, class, wealth and power, the fate of Om and Ishvar, in spite of their urge for hard work and hope for a bright future, is reduced to a simple exit back to the periphery of society — a life of beggary. Om and Ishvar who wanted to rise to happiness by means of hard work, ultimately are forced to become beggars victimized by all types of oppression and national politics. At the end of the novel it
is painful to see them begging in streets to keep their lives going. Their sad plight is summarized by Peter Morey in following words:

“By a series of tragic twists of fate, Ishvar and Omprakash eventually find themselves at the mercy of one particularly vicious personification of the conjunction of rural and urban, feudal and capitalist modes of oppression.”

The third narrative in the novel focuses on the life and fate of Maneck Kohlah whose is “the story of the ecological denudation of the Himalayas through the forces of “development” and the death of indigenous enterprise through the entry of multinationals.”

Maneck moves from the invigorating atmosphere of his home in the hills to Bombay to complete his education at a technical college. Coming from the hills, Maneck finds it difficult to adapt himself to the indiscipline of the college hostel, and puts up as a paying guest with Dina Dalal, his mother’s childhood friend.

Maneck is a sensitive Parsi boy who takes life as a great burden to lead and lift. His family lives in the hill station of Himalayas Mountains. In his background also lies the pathetic story of India’s partition. During partition they lost most of their lands due to some government frauding and caste discrimination. His father Farokh Kohlah’s soft-drink business suffers a heavy setback because of a modernized plant, leading him to reveries.

Maneck is a victim of displacement. Due to dwindling income and a slight change of attitude of his father, Maneck is sent to a boarding school in the city to which he greatly opposes. But his parents insist and he “learned to tolerate boarding
school but not to love it.” (FB 211) He feels displaced because he loved his life and his home in the hills very much.

The separation from his parents makes him feel “an ache of betrayal” (FB 211) and their relationship begins to deteriorate. He is badly scolded by his father for making changes in their shop. He begins to feel alienated and starts separating himself from his parents. Much to his dismay, his parents again send him away to a technical college in Bombay and choose his major “Refrigeration and air-conditioning” for him. Undoubtedly, his parents want the best for him, but the sensitive Maneck feels himself isolated and mentally oppressed.

Maneck comes to attend the college that was chosen for him. At the college hostel, he becomes the victim of continuous oppression and humiliation by his seniors. Ragging is in fact a shameful reality that violates the dignity of a person. Even though the evil practice of ragging has been criticized for decades, such incidents of inhuman oppression are continuing. As a result many victim students, who succumb to it, develop a fear psychosis that haunts them throughout their lives, or give up their studies and go back home, some lose their mental balance and some are seriously injured. Mistry, in the novel, gives a horrible account of Maneck’s falling a prey to oppression by his senior students. They hold Maneck down and strip him, and:

“tumbled him into the freezer, doubled over to fit the confined space, and heaved the door shut. The darkness of a coffin closed in around him (Maneck). . . then a banging commenced, and continued for next two minutes, followed by a brief silence. His hammering started again — weaker now, and sporadic, faltering,
picking up, fading. The blows became alarmingly feeble before dying out altogether.” (FB 249)

Maneck had shat in the freezer. The raggers pulled him out moulded in a stoop. He was too cold, terrified and stiff to emerge or straighten himself. This much oppression was not enough to amuse the raggers. Maneck was put to one more task: “the thermostat check-up” or he would have to repeat the first part. They threatened to freeze him again with his shit this time if he does not complete the second part of the test. The terror-struck Maneck “started to snifflle, working his foreskin back and forth, while they chanted. Desperate to end the humiliation, he labored hard, his wrist aching, feeling nothing in his “thermostat”, worried that something was wrong, that the freezes had damaged it.” (FB 250)

The humiliating ragging leaves the oppressed Maneck trembling long after. He decides to pack up and go back to his parents. In an attempt to have his parents accept him back home, he writes a letter to them but instead his mother arranges a different living situation for him and he moves in with Dina Dalal. He arrives at Dina’s flat the day the tailors arrive; finds a temporary home there and becomes very close to the tailors, especially to Om.

Mistry describes the brief spell of happiness in the chapter “Sailing under One Flag”, when after the tailors’ ordeal in the quarry, Dina, Ishvar, Om and Maneck start living under the same roof. The bond between the four becomes stronger after the horrific experience of construction plant. “They achieve fruitful interaction leading to genuine affection by cooperation and the sharing of stories
emblematized by the never ending patchwork quilt Dina makes from the tailors’ surplus material.”

Maneck sees beyond the tailors’ condition as lower-caste poor tailors and gets intimiated with them treating them as human beings. When Ishvar and Om go back to the village, Maneck goes home with the intention of returning to Bombay. But he is not able to come back because of his failure to get admission to the college for the next course. He gets a job in Dubai and returns to India only in 1984 after the double tragedy of the loss of his father and the riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. He happens to read the news in the old newspaper about his college friend Avinash gone missing during Emergency. The police had reported that he died in “a railway accident”. But the reporter who had examined Avinash’s corpse, uncovered Avinash’s story and revealed the truth that “the injuries were consistent with other confirmed incidents of torture.” (FB 594) He was tortured and killed in police custody for anti-Emergency and anti-Indira Gandhi slogans and demonstrations. The police had become a partner in the government’s depressing record of human rights abuse. The harsh reality here is that Avinash is also a victim of oppression by those working for protection of the common man.

The report is given as a run-up to the suicide of Avinash’s three sisters because of the inability of their old father to arrange dowry for their marriage. Here Mistry hints at the societal oppression that middle-class families undergo in order to arrange dowry for the marriages of their daughters. The photograph of Avinash’s three sisters in the newspaper with three saris gripping their fragile necks drags Maneck’s thoughts to the past. He remembers how he used to enjoy feeding them
when they were little; they used to bite his fingers in fun. He feels utterly tormented to think of the plight of the poor parents and cries out with an aching heart:

“Where was God, the Bloody Fool? Did he have no notion of fair and unfair? Couldn’t he read a simple balance sheet? He would have been sacked long ago if He was managing a corporation . . .” (FB 595)

Also to his mother, he articulates his frustration saying, “You sent me away, you and Daddy. And then I couldn’t come back. You lost me, and I lost – everything.” (FB 591)

For the sensitive and isolated Maneck it is difficult to live through the tapestry of loss, destitution, injustice and oppression that constitutes the Indian nation. On his way back to Dubai, he makes a halt at Bombay, where the tragic fate of Dina, Om and Ishvar comes as a final blow to his sensitive soul. He finds that Dina has been kicked out of her apartment; lost her prized independence and had to seek shelter in the patriarchal protection of her elder brother Nusswan as an unpaid servant. He goes to Nusswan’s place expecting to meet the same charming Dina but is terribly shocked to see her old and haggard. He comes to know about the sorry plight of his tailor-friends. On his way back he is further perturbed to see Ishvar and Om handicapped and working as beggars. He recognizes them instantly—Ishvar sitting on a platform with wheels is being pulled by Om — one reduced to the status of a disabled beggar and the other a eunuch. He is so terribly depressed that he does not respond to Ishvar and Om pleading with him for alms. He pretends not to recognize them and moves away. The culmination of these series of staggering
events is that he is totally exhausted of all mental energies and in a fit of extreme depression throws himself in front of a train and commits suicide.

The startling and unconventional ending of the novel is greatly shocking. The “shock for the readers, hoping against hope that at least one of these characters will be spared is that, finally, Maneck, the single figure left undisfigured in the novel, is killed too—in a senseless “accident” of the sort only too familiar on the sub-continent.”

Dina’s surrender, tailors’ amputation, Maneck’s suicide and Avinash’s murder can be seen as a comment on the society and politics that inflict oppression on common people. The novel becomes a story of courage and dignity of the marginals and subalterns, battered by continuous state of oppression and conscienceless rule that distort the balance of human society. There is a strong undercurrent of oppression running throughout the novel. Apart from the tragic stories of the protagonists, there are several other examples of oppression that reassert that oppression is the grim reality of life.

The Monkey Man, in the neighbourhood of the tailors in hutment, earns his living by his animals. He tortures and keeps his two monkeys Laila-Majnoo under the constant threat of beatings. He makes the wretched animals perform antics to entertain people. Later, after the death of the monkeys, the Monkey Man substitutes two children, and thus takes oppression to human domain.

Beggarmaster, who leads and trains a team of mutilated beggars, oppresses them by making them surrender their earnings to him. He mutilates his beggars to
enhance their potential as beggars. He offers paid protection to Dina, but paradoxically “his protection to Dina operates through violence wrought upon others; in this case the landlord’s ruffians. The Beggarmaster breaks their fingers and they are thus “persuaded” to leave Dina alone.”

At the initial stage of the novel, even Dina herself is not beyond manipulative moves. She hires the tailors at a meager wage and does not allow them to know her suppliers or market. Even she literally seals them away from the business and padlocks the front door when she goes to the export company.

However Dina herself is a victim of bodily discrimination and oppression by the patriarchal social structure “most noticeably as a teenager when she is physically chastised by her brother and guardian, Nusswan, for ignoring his injunction not to follow fashion and cut her hair, in a disturbing scene where her burgeoning sexual maturity is exposed to his ambiguous gaze.” (FB 23-24) His dictatorial and oppressive behaviour, and his strict discipline bordering on the tyrannical, beating up his little sister, making her work like a domestic drudge make Dina’s life miserable.

Through Dina, Mistry pictures how women are oppressed and harassed even by the priests in temples and churches. The novel mentions the hypocritical religiosity of Dustoor Framji who has the habit of taking young girls in close embrace. During her visits to fire temple with her mother, Dina also becomes the victim of the priest’s idiosyncratic conduct who is nicknamed as “Dustoor Daab-Chaab” for the manner he fondles his female devotees.
Even the educated and unemployed lawyers in the Bombay court do not spare women from sexual oppression. In order to save her eviction from the flat, Dina goes to seek protection from court. When she approaches the court gate, a group of lawyers surrounds her and demands charges, showing their degree and advising her to be careful in choosing the lawyer, some of them make indecent advances: “She flinched, and tried again to free herself. Then, in the crush, a hand squeezed her bottom, while another passed neatly over her breast.” (FB 560)

Dina is oppressed and harassed by her landlord too. Though he never appears in the novel, but his terror is embodied in the rent collector and the goons who terrorise Dina and other tenants as well. On several occasions she tries to ward off the landlord who keeps a vigil on Dina’s every move. She is obliged to rely on Beggarmaster’s protection which is not unconditional and stable.

Occasionally in the novel, oppression moves beyond torture, suppression and tyranny. As explained by Pramod K. Nayar:

“There is voyeurism—which violates a person’s privacy—which for Omprakash and Maneck is an attempt to break off, or at least subvert the restraints. Their crude antics and remarks with/about Dina’s personal effects and body are also violent acts.”

It is to be noted Dina is not the only who is oppressed and harassed in her own house. Nawaz, who gives a temporary shelter to the tailors under his awning, often beats his wife and abuses her whenever she utter anything against his decisions. In “the Village by River” also, it is not only Roopa or low-caste women who are harassed and oppressed by male superiority. Even the upper-caste women
are not exempted from oppression. They express their resentment at the birth of two sons to Dukhi because “. . . the birth of daughters often brought them beatings from their husbands and their husbands’ families. Sometimes they were ordered to discreetly get rid of the newborn. Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with her swaddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death.” (FB 99-100) The novel thus sheds light on the harsh reality that ours is a society where gender bias exists even in 21\textsuperscript{st} century. These micro-incidents in the novel underline the macro issues like the denial of the right to live with dignity or even to be born for girls in some families.

Thus the overall scenario of the novel is grim dealing with various types of oppressions. According to T. Vijay Kumar, “\textit{A Fine Balance} is a depressing novel set in a depressing period of Indian history.”\textsuperscript{30}

Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Omprakash—all discover that there are other forces to play larger than their individual selves. The tailors at first are oppressed in their exile in the city away from their village to which they cannot return for fear of losing their life. Then their life becomes a death in life as they are doomed to undergo everlasting suffering, physical and mental. Dina, too, faces irrevocable damages to her individuality and self-reliance. She is “reduced from female individualist to feminine subject” as the author “offers his text on the altar of realism.”\textsuperscript{31} An extremely depressed Maneck fails to find balance in his life ends his life, which becomes the final tragedy of the book. This extreme act by Maneck has been criticized for making the novel very morbid. “However, it is Mistry’s way of
showing how a member of the privileged middle class, the sensitive Maneck, lost out in the struggle to maintain ‘a fine balance between hope and despair’.”32

The Emergency and its ally—oppression— intrude conspicuously into the lives of all the protagonists leading to their eventual loss and destruction. Critics find sharp criticism of the dark days of Emergency in the presentation of the predicaments of protagonists. A critic comments:

“During the course of the pulsating narrative, without any obvious authorial intrusions, Mistry sharply criticizes the internal Emergency. He shows that all the avowed promises of the Emergency to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati, dowry system, child marriage and harassment of backward castes by upper castes never materialize. Instead as Mistry shows in several instances in the novel a nexus emerges between the police and the established hierarchy — either the upper dominance in the villages or the land/building mafia in Bombay.”33

Mistry’s powerful novel makes a brave attempt to achieve a fine balance between the heavy odds pitted against the fragility of life and the ruthlessness of actual happenings at a troubled time in recent Indian history. It leaves us with some uncomfortable and disturbing issues which are as relevant today as they were in 1970’s. Atrocities on the poor and the outcastes, women being suppressed and assaulted, and their faces being ruined by acids, slum people being forcibly sterilized, innocent people murdered or put behind bars, and persecution by influential people in the novel give an impression that the Emergency is but a metaphor for a society where every day is experiencing a new emergency, and the castration of Omprakash is symbolic of impotency of the general populace of India
in face of oppression. The novel makes a powerful plea against oppression and demands the right to live peacefully and happily for the underprivileged and oppressed members of our society. It is, in fact a life-changing read. It makes us cry and it makes us angry. Somewhere in these six hundred pages, one becomes friends with the protagonists, beginning to share their joys and sorrows, and desperately wishing a happy ending with them, though deep down one is apprehensive of the ending which, in fact, is heart-wrenching. Therein lies the success of the novel that it has capacity to sensitize even a stern or indifferent reader to the problems and issues of the suppressed and oppressed members of the society. The significance of the book is explained by Pico Iyer:

“. . . few have caught the real sorrow and inexplicable strength of India, the unaccountable crookedness and sweetness, as well as Mistry. And no reader who finishes this book will look at the poor—in any street—quite the same way again.”

To conclude, the novel as a powerful indictment against oppression is a great text especially in “what does the text not say in order to say what it does.” Mistry emphasizes the point that all sorts of oppression should be eradicated through exercising tenderness, compassion and cooperation for our less-privileged fellow-beings to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair.
REFERENCES


4. Ibid., pg. 4.


7. Ibid., pg. 78.


14. Rohinton Mistry, A Fine Balance, (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pg. 52. (Subsequent references from the book are taken from the same edition. It is shortly referred as FB.)


29. Ibid., pg. 124.


33. Ibid., pp 130-31.
