Chapter 5:

Struggle for Balance during Emergency - Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*
The previous chapter presented how Emergency affected the upper classes of urban India with special reference to Delhi in Nayantara Sahgal’s Rich Like Us. This chapter also centres around Emergency but focuses on the lower classes in both urban and rural India. It also depicts the practice of casteism in Indian society.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times … it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.”

Charles Dickens’ above statement, in his A Tale of Two Cities (1859), refers to the French Revolution and aptly describes the national Emergency portrayed in Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance. It was shortlisted for the 1996 Booker Prize and won the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize. It deals with the painful experiences of four main characters: Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah, Ishvar and Omprakash Darji and a host of others during national Emergency. He portrays in his novel – politics, sociology, religion, economics and defence – “a patchwork quilt.”

The novel presents a view of the poor struggling for their ‘survival of the fittest’ in the “City by the Sea” – Mumbai. It is marked by constant changes in its landscape, skyscrapers and in the people who inhabit it. In Mumbai, one witnesses the lives of the common man being governed by globalization on the one hand, and by poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, exploitation and homelessness on the other hand.

Already chapter three and chapter four have dealt with national Emergency in The Midnight’s Children and Rich Like Us. Though A Fine Balance deals with Emergency as the moving factor in the lives of its characters, it closely portrays the practice of casteism in rural India. It shows the impact of politics on religion, education, industrialization and gender on the lives of common man. It also focuses on how violence is used as a tool of politics. The special contribution of the novel is that it shows the horrors of life in Mumbai and especially of those who migrate in search of bread and butter during the fateful times of Emergency and are displaced and isolated against the background of the unknown, remote and terrifying metropolis of Mumbai.

The novel begins in 1975 with the accidental meeting of Ishvar, Om and Maneck in a train. Emergency has just been declared in the country and the common people have yet to understand the threat of it. The two tailors, Ishvar and Om are taken into service by
Dina to earn a living through stitching dresses on contract to Au Revoir Export Company. And Maneck lives as a paying guest in her flat. Through Mrs. Gupta’s approval, the manager of Au Revoir Exports, we are confronted with the involvement of the business houses with Emergency:

“The Prime Minister’s declaration yesterday of the Internal Emergency and incarcerated most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students and social workers, “Isn’t that good news? She sparkled with joy.”

Dina nodded, doubtful, “I thought the court found her guilty of cheating in the election.”

“No, no, no!” said Mrs. Gupta. “That is all rubbish, it will be appealed.”

“Now all those troublemakers who accused her falsely have been put in jail. No more strikes and morchas and silly disturbances.”

As Dina struggles to earn a living for herself, various events strip her of dignity and humanity during Emergency like the tailors turning homeless, the threats of her landlord and finally the vasectomy operations of the tailors. Thus she loses her priced independence and is ruined due to the Emergency regime. It is the tailors in the novel who are the worst sufferers right from their own village to the city of Mumbai. They are the carriers of the stigma of casteism in the novel.

Through Dukhi’s story in rural India, we are brought to the time of Independence struggle in India. It is ironic that pledges of fighting against caste injustice were taken then but are still to be worked upon. The speaker who comes to spread the Mahatma’s message says:

“What is this disease? You may ask. This disease, brothers and sisters is the notion of untouchability, ravaging us for centuries, denying dignity to our fellow human beings. This disease must be purged from our society, from our hearts and from our minds. No one is untouchable, for we are all children of the same God. Remember what Gandhiji says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisonous milk.”

Om dreams of revenge but both Ashraf and Ishvar know the futility of such
dreams and instead decide to send Om to Mumbai. With this move, a new phase starts in the lives of Om and Ishvar. In Mumbai, class rather than caste oppresses them. Om and Ishvar move from the “Village by the River” to the “City by the Sea” to escape the atrocities of caste-based politics. Their diaspora exemplifies casteist politics and communal riots uprooting whole populations of poor and politically unawakened masses and directing them into new identities. Even after independence and laws against the practice of untouchability, it is sad to find untouchability practiced even today.

The novel also deals with the story of Maneck Kohlah and the ecological exploitation of the Himalayas through the forces of “development” and the death of native enterprise through the entry of multinationals. Maneck is sent to study air conditioning and refrigeration in Mumbai and meets the dynamic student leader, Avinash. We come across the politics of industrialization through Rustom Kohlah, who runs a business in the peaceful hills of North India. His specialty is the Kaycee, a cold drink. When the multinationals invade the hills, with their new technology and strong advertising campaigns, Kaycee is on its way to a slow but sure death. Maneck urges his father to advertise, to adopt new technologies, but to no benefit. The principle of survival of the fittest applies to it.

“But the giant corporation had targeted the hills; they had Kaycee in their sights. They infiltrated Mr. Kolah’s territory with their boardroom arrogance and advertising campaigns and cut—throat techniques. Representatives approached him with a position: “Pack up your machines, sign over all rights to Kolah’s Cola, and be an agent for our brand. Come grow with us and prosper.”

Mr. Kolah’s adamancy can be compared to that of Satyajit in Shadow from Ladakh by Bhabani Bhattacharya. The novel shows conflict between the Gandhian rural economy supported by Satyajit and fast industrialization and mechanization of the country represented by Bhaskar. Satyajit is a follower of Gandhi and the moving spirit of Gandhigram, a symbol of conservative reaction. He is against industrialization and opposes the annexation of the land of Gandhigram to extend the Steeltown project by Bhaskar. Satyajit does not realize the need of industrialization but is propagandizing anti-industrialization stand. Mr. Kolah shares the same attitude towards industrialization. This is termed “matsyanyaya” (the way of the fishes) by Kautilya in his Arthashastra where the great fishes devour the smaller ones. Industrial capitalism, in the modernist society, gives rise to unequal class relations resulting in imbalance of life.
The novel deals with the misery of common people due to industrialization as well as due to the brutality of tyrannical politics. He also describes the horrors of a government work – camp, tortures in state prisons, humiliations and sufferings that poor people have to undergo under the fascist government. The caste system in the Indian society ensures that no vertical development is possible. Migration of rural to urban is extensive as they are even today deprived of development in the true sense. Casteism plays a key role in a hidden form in the present times. Nobody thinks of changing the situation since it has turned to be a political tool now and somewhat beneficial for some opportunists.

Dukhi Mochi, who belonged to the Chamar caste of tanners and leather workers, decided to send his sons Narayan and Ishvar to be apprenticed as tailors as he had experienced the torturous and humiliating life of the lower castes in his village:

“During his childhood years, he mastered a full catalogue of the real and imaginary crimes a low – caste person could commit and the corresponding punishments were engraved upon his memory. By the time he entered his teens, he had acquired all the knowledge he would need to perceive the invisible line of caste he could never cross, to survive in the village like his ancestors, with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions.”

The upper caste people wielded power and ensured that their domination is never challenged.

“… The villagers saw a sharp increase in the number of floggings meted out to members of the untouchable castes, as the Thakurs and Pandits tried to whip the world into shape. The crimes were varied and imaginative: a Bhangi had dared to let his unclean eyes meet Brahmin’s eyes; a Chamar had walked on the wrong side of the temple road and defied it; another had strayed near a puja that was in progress and had allowed his undeserving ears to hear the sacred shlokas; a Bhungi child had not erased her footprints clearly from the Thakur’s courtyard ….”

The casteism portrayed in the novel can be compared to the casteism depicted in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935). He portrays humiliations faced in a single day by the untouchable protagonist, Bakha. The hypocrisy, humiliation and life full of hardships are same for Dukhi’s family and Bakha’s family. Both the writers have por-
trayed casteism in realistic colours.

The upper – castes made use of the disciplining methods to ensure that individuals were constantly in their fixed place. To them, any shift would lead to a disruption and so the gaze is always alert, punishments are quick and immediate:

“For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death - the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had lead poured into his ears because he had ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord’s field, had been forced to eat the landlord’s excrement in the village square. Dhiraj had tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows and had him hanged.”

Hence, when Ishvar and Narayan had dared to enter the premises of the village school, after they had spent many hours near it; they are punished for trespassing. It is considered necessary to make an example of every law-breaker by quick, immediate punishment for disobedience of law. Hence, the teacher sneaked up behind them and:

“He grabbed them by their ears and dragged them outside … he twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry … he released their ears to deliver stinging blows to their head … holding Narayan, he slapped Ishvar six times in quick succession across the face, then delivered the same number to his brother’s face … he slapped them again till his hand was sore.”

The defilement of the untouchables is a cause for various landowners to break upon them all sorts of brutalities. After a day of back-breaking labor, pounding chillies for Thakur Premji, Dukhi is beaten and his wages taken away because the mortar used for pounding had split in two. Ishvar bore on his face, like a caste mark, the scar that he had sustained in hereditary occupation as a leather worker. Helping to shift a dying buffalo from the field of an upper-caste landlord, he is hit on the face by the buffalo. When Narayan and his two friends decide to exercise their vote during elections, they are subjected to inhuman torture by Thakur Dharamsi:

“Throughout the day, at intervals, they were flogged as they hung naked by
their ankles from the branches of a banyan tree. Drifting in and out of consciousness, their screams grew faint … in the far fields, his men urinated on the three inverted faces … burning coals were held to the three men’s genitals and 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 the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square.”

This kind of punishment is extremely inhuman but it is considered essential because it was a way of exercising power. Elections in the village had been a farce where Thakur Dharamsi’s men casted votes on behalf of the entire village. Narayan decides to take a stand and he and his family pays for it with their lives. Om and Ishvar escape as they were at Ashraf Chacha’s in the town. The inequality in the different castes damages the integrity and democracy. As seen in chapter one, caste factor contributes to a large number of parties in every state.

There are various atrocities committed on the untouchables. Buddhu’s wife refused to go to the field with the Zamindar’s son so they shaved off her head and walked her naked through the village square and Dukhi’s wife was raped in the orchard. They were helpless victims and their crimes were varied. Their children were denied the right to education. The novel focuses on man’s inhumanity to man faced by the underprivileged in India.

To establish social justice and equality, the economically and socially backward castes, tribes and minorities are granted social privileges in the Indian Constitution through the Directive Principles. For the analysis of this novel, the framework of the Constitutional provisions of Emergency and special provisions of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (articles 330 to 340) were found relevant. It states that the lower castes are conferred special rights like not only reservations but also separate Commissions to ensure that no injustices are levied upon them. We get an insight into rural India and come across the atrocities committed on the untouchables. Unfortunately, most of these provisions remain in theory and not in practice. One wonders about the sound functioning of the Commissions set up to protect the rights of the underprivileged working.

One finds parallels of the various incidents from the novel to real life. In the

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autumn of 1981, Harijans were killed in several villages in Uttar Pradesh. The killers, who were Thakur Rajputs, had just one message to send through murder — the untouchable Jatav cobblers had to learn their place in society and the caste hierarchy.\textsuperscript{11} As Susan Bayly points out,

“According to government figures, there were 40,000 anti-Harijan ‘atrocities’ between 1966 and 1976, this being the period of Mrs. Gandhi’s so-called ‘decade of development.’”\textsuperscript{12}

The novel is full of personal hope of the untouchable characters that their quest for individual freedom may triumph. Hope emerges in the rebellion by Dukhi, when he decides to apprentice his sons as tailors. Dukhi manages to get away with it due to the contemporary wave of social reforms. It was in 1939, when the Poona Pact was signed among Hindu leaders promising the end of the discrimination against Untouchables.\textsuperscript{13} By using the name “Dukhi,” Rohinton Mistry is presenting the sad lives of the untouchables. Significantly, “Dukhi” is the name of the untouchable protagonist in a short story, ‘Sadgati’ (Deliverance) by the Hindi novelist, Premchand, made into a film by Satyajit Ray. Premchand’s Dukhi dies of starvation and hard labour upon an already weak body. In contrast, Rohinton Mistry’s Dukhi survives the injustices and turns his disillusionment towards a constructive purpose, to release his sons from the occupational stigma of being leather workers. Mistry’s Dukhi is more optimistic towards life and dreams for a better future for his family.

Along with the portrayal of casteism, there are parallels between the oppressive policies of Emergency and the caste system and shows similarities between them. The slum dwellers’ homes are razed to the ground by the Beautification brigade and are dumped into trucks which deliver them to construction sites as free labor. The parallel with slavery is shown when Ishvar and Om are forcibly transported to the sites despite being employed; have to buy their freedom from the city’s Beggar Master. Their transportation plays the role of a concentration camp since their presence spoils the city’s beauty.

Nusswan, Dina Dalal’s wealthy but obtuse brother, gives the idea of a final solution. He suggests that the two hundred million who are “surplus to requirements” may be eliminated through “a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is cost-effective.”\textsuperscript{14}
If one looks into the origins of the crisis of Emergency, one realizes that it is an outcome of the abuse of power. Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s appointment to the head of the ruling Congress party was considered a compromise between the right and left wings of the party; however right-wingers in the party continually questioned her leadership. She imprisoned her political foes, passed laws that limited personal freedom and placed the nation’s press under strict censorship. She made constitutional amendments to save herself from prosecution of past or future criminal offences. Perhaps the most evil elements of Emergency were initiated by her son, Sanjay Gandhi in the guise of ‘beautification,’ a process of slum clearance and family planning began. It meant clearing the poor away from areas so that the pieces of real estate could be used by his friends, the property developers.

Under Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s leadership, India’s democracy suffered immensely. In 1971, her election slogan, “Abolish Poverty,” made her very popular with the public. Family planning was a “voluntary” sterilization programme; however, the sterilizations were only voluntary for the upper classes. The hypocrisy of this programme is seen through Ishvar and Om who are forced to undergo vasectomies that leave one crippled and the other castrated.

The novel illustrates a central point of the capacity of human beings to endure hardships. Rohinton Mistry is interested in all aspects of humanity and in the problems of the common man. What is remarkable is that all the characters in the novel are trying to resist Emergency in their own way. None of them has given up. The Internal Emergency that forms the backdrop for the entire novel can best be described in the words that Nehru had used to describe the condition of India and Indians under British rule:

“We seemed to be helpless in the grip of some all – powerful monster, our limbs were paralyzed, our minds deadened … The dominant impulse in India was that of fear – pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear; fear of the army, the police, the widespread secret service, fear of the official class; fear of laws to suppress and of prison.”

The condition of the common man, especially those who choose to oppose this anti – democratic period was a very pathetic one:

“The Emergency rule was one of the darkest chapters of Indian history and nothing had happened during the British rule is comparable to the large – scale
sterilizations of the poorest and the helpless, their sufferings and the tortures of political prisoners … the yet untold story of the political prisoners does not diminish its magnitude.”

Every Indian was under surveillance. Everyone was suspect and had to be investigated and suddenly new student unions sprang up which expected total submission to their demands and codes of conduct. Students and teachers who voiced their honest opinions were rapidly arrested. As Thoreau has aptly said, “When injustice is all around, the only place for just men is prison.”

Under the guise of the beautification of cities, entire slums were demolished. Om and Ishvar learn from Rajaram that the hutment dwellers were tricked into leaving their huts and then:

“But once the colony was empty, the big machines went in. Most of the bulldozers were old jeeps and trucks, with steel plates and short wooden beams like battering rams affixed to the front bumpers. They had begun tearing into the structures of plywood, corrugated metal and plastic … People were crushed. Blood everywhere. The new law says the city must be made beautiful.”

The poor turn homeless due to the beautification of the city. The police are actively involved in the process of discipline in a number of ways:

“Gathering crowds for political rallies … Rounding up MISA suspects … demolishing hutment colonies, vendors’ stalls, jhopadpattis … dump pavement – dwellers in waste land outside the city … the policemen performing their task efficiently, prodding, poking, kicking …”

During Emergency, a work force was set on the lines of slave workers. Beggars, pavement dwellers, tailors, carpenters, rag pickers, scrap dealers and hair collectors are all herded into trucks to be driven to work sites because “In a huge city like this there is work even for a corpse.” The brutality in the treatment of these bonded laborers is presented graphically – their living conditions, their food and clothing.

The novel draws a lively picture of terror that was set free in the name of national security and welfare. Protests were met with bullets and all the fundamental rights
were cancelled out. For the common people, Emergency is nothing but ‘one more government tamasha.’


The scene of Ishvar and Om taken to the City Embellishment program reminds one of the round-up cattle. People were reduced to a commodity:

“Late in the day the truck arrived at an irrigating project where the facilitator unloaded the ninety – six individuals. The project manager counted them before signing the delivery receipt.”

The assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi worsens the situation. A taxi – driver advises Maneck to shave off his beard. The city – life was paralyzed. The taxi - driver believes that she deserved her fate,

“She gave her blessings to the guns and bombs, and then these wicked, violent instruments began hitting her own government … all her chickens came home for roasting.”

Thus Dina at the end has lost her precious independence and seeks shelter with Nusswan. Om is castrated and Ishvar is crippled by the loss of both his legs and is reduced to begging during the authoritarian regime of Emergency. Maneck throws himself in front of a moving train.

With the curtailing of the fundamental rights of people and the new law MISA, anybody could be imprisoned without trial and there were countless deaths in police custody. The most brutal aspect of Emergency was that anyone, young or old, married or unmarried was forced to undergo family planning operation. Ration cards were issued only to those who had a family planning certificate. Incentives like transistors were offered. Forced vasectomy, detention without trial, limitations of the freedom of speech, media censorship and ambiguous family planning clinics were the consequences of Emergency. No one was exempted from the experience of cruelty: students were tortured and killed by the police; unmarried young women committed suicide to avoid being an economic burden for their families; young men died after forced vasectomy.
The kind of democracy practiced in India had brought freedom only to the privileged few and thus, the poor would not be affected by the curbing of such freedom. This logic was often used to overlook the Emergency, arguing that it did not harm the poor, rather it was imposed to bestow greater benefits upon them and in essence for their own good! This brings a confirmation, that for the marginal people “Living each day is to face one Emergency or another.”

Ishvar and Om are forcibly picked up to fulfill the daily quota of sterilizations. The political power of Thakur Dharamsi is quite evident here when he directs the doctor to not only operate but castrate Om, who is a mere youth, waiting to get married. Ashraf Chacha, a grand old man, goes through a vasectomy and loses his life after the operation. Such is the lawlessness during the Emergency that Sergeant Kesar tells Dina Dalal,

“Lots of people have disappeared in the Emergency.”

As a result, Dina is forced to live at her brother’s place who makes a domestic servant of her. This is how a lady from the privileged and upper class Parsi community becomes a pawn in the game of politics. Had not the Emergency declared, Dina would live a respectable and independent life.

Maneck suffers the loss of his beloved foothill Himalayan town which has been sacrificed due to economic development. His every loss is a loss for the Indian middle class, whose morality, hopes and desires, he represents. His death is shocking but symbolizes the losses that the Indian middle class has borne and still continues to suffer.

There is another shock that awaits Maneck, before his death. When he comes back to India in 1984, for his father’s funeral, in the old papers, he found news about Avinash gone missing during Emergency. It was reported by the police that he died in “a railway accident.” But the reporter uncovering Avinash’s story, who had examined Avinash’s corpse, said that “the injuries were consistent with other confirmed incidents of torture.” 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. Those working for the protection of the poor had become their worst enemies!

Mr. Valmik Rao is a representative of the intelligentsia who loses his eyesight
as well as voice during Emergency. This symbolically represents the impotence of the Indian intelligentsia during the Emergency. Beggar Master embodies the functions of the state. Through him, Mistry reviews the nature of the overburdened postcolonial Indian state. However, it is interesting that he is able to protect his dependents much better than the ‘official’ state is! He describes human nature, saying,

“People forget how vulnerable they are […] this hungry and cruel world could strip them, put them in the same position as my beggars.”

The novel tells about the downfall of Mrs. Indira Gandhi during Emergency and the dynastic politics in India. She is portrayed as “Mother India” and her son, Sanjay as “Son of India.” While talking about the organization of rallies, poor people are rounded up from slums and forced to board buses and go to a god forsaken village to pretend interest in Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The political rally comes out as a big farce and the people who were rounded up to the rally aren’t even returned to their respective homes or slums. It is interesting to note that since the organizers of the rally couldn’t keep up their promise of five rupees and some snacks, how they could expect the people to understand and accept Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s false promises! The slogan of the government: “The nation is on the move!” seem ironical because moving stands for progress but in fact here it stands for destruction and homelessness. Very significant in this respect is Omprakash’s remark after forced castration:

“You really thought they would help?” said Om. ‘Don’t you understand? We are less than animals to them.”

The poor are powerless in the face of Emergency. The metaphor of chess for life fits on several levels. The chessmen are divided in function, pyramid style, like the structure of a society. The major and most dispensable layer consists of the identical pawns because they have no individual identities, these pawns are easily expandable. India’s pawns are the poor, like Avinash, the homeless, like Ishvar and Om, all of whom exist at the bottom of the social pyramid. The present study has tried to explore how common man becomes a pawn in the political system through the analysis of selective postcolonial Indian English novels and hence it is titled, ‘People, Pawns and Politics.’ As a chess player, uses pawns to make his moves, similarly the political system of Emergency had made a pawn of the poor people.
Unfortunately, rich people do not make any effort to understand the troubles of these people. An example would be the attitude expressed by Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta of Au Revoir Exports. Dina’s brother is supportive of government measures considering that:

“People sleeping on the pavements give industry a bad name. My friend was saying last week – he’s the director of a multinational, mind you, not some small, two-paisa business – he was saying that at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated….got rid of. Counting them as unemployment statistics year after year just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy.”

Nusswan calls the Prime Minister “our visionary leader” and the Emergency “a true spirit of renaissance” which is again highly ironical because one of the most important values associated with renaissance is the celebration of the human spirit, the very spirit which was crushed during the Emergency. The absurdity of the actions of the government is seen in memorable satirical scenes. The chapter wittingly entitled “Day at the Circus, Night in the Slum” is representative of this. Here, Ishvar, Om, Rajaram and all the people living in the hutment colony are forced to get on buses in order to attend the Prime Minister’s speech. This is the first blow to the tailors.

“Their performance on the tightrope of mud soon collected a crowd. A puff of wind caught the umbrellas; the men wobbled. A stronger gust pulled them off balance. The audience began to laugh. Some children imitated the funny walk. The visitors abandoned their sandals to the mud and, mustering dignity, walked towards the water tap queue.”

The disinterest of the forced audience from the political speech is made clear by the ironic comments of the slum dwellers to the party workers when invited to attend the rally:

“Tell her how happy we are! Why do we need to come?”… “Ask your men with cameras to pull some photos of our lovely houses, our healthy children! Show that to the Prime Minister!”

Descriptions of the activities of the audience during the political speeches illustrate the lack of concern of the slum dwellers. The commentary of the hair collector,
Rajaram - “‘See!’ said Rajaram. ‘I told you it’s going to be a day at the circus – we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything.’”

The novel criticizes the drama of flattering politicians, rehearsed hand-clapping exercises and various gimmicks to get the audience to clap. When despite the reward offered – five rupees, sandwiches and tea – most people are unwilling to go, Sergeant Kesar orders his men to block the slum exits and force people to get on the buses. Everything seems staged and fake. The stage on which the rally is to take place is bedecked with flowers and illuminated by colored lights, and there is an eighty foot cardboard and plywood cut out of the Prime Minister, with arms outstretched, an outline map of India forming a halo behind her head. Compared to the massive decorations Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her speech seem less impressive. Her gesture of flinging the garlands into the crowd is not well received:

“Her father also used to do that when he was Prime Minister’ said Ishvar. ‘Yes’, said Rajaram. “I saw it once. But when he did it he looked humble.’ ‘She looks like she is throwing rubbish at us,’ said Om.

There is a description of the helicopter scattering packets of rose petals, one of which fails to open and the event is ‘blessed’ by the presence of Sanjay Gandhi floating above in a hot air balloon dropping above the audience leaflets outlining the Twenty-Point Programme. The words of the anchor on the stage are comical and ridiculous:

“Yes my brothers and sisters, Mother India sits on stage with us, and the son of India shines from the sky upon us! The glorious present here, now, and the glorious future up there, waiting to descend and embrace our lives! What a blessed nation we are!”

The situation reaches the climax when the giant cutout, disturbed by the wind whipped up by the helicopter’s blades, hovers over the crowd below:

“The crowd shouted in alarm. The figure with outstretched arms groaned, and the ropes straining at the moorings. Security men waved frantically at the helicopter while struggling to hold onto the ropes and braces. But the whirlwind was much too strong to withstand. The cutout started to topple slowly, face forward. Those in the vicinity of the cardboard-and-plywood giant ran for their lives.”

The rally breaks up and ambulances “Come to collect the casualties of the eighty-foot Prime Minister’s collapse.”
The Prime Minister expressed her wish to provide houses for the poor, control population growth and eliminate poverty from cities, towns and villages. The paradox is that the eradication of the slums is followed by the erection of two giant billboards with the Prime Minister’s face. City beautification has to be followed by the eradication of poverty. Officials step in to eliminate poverty by giving the power to representatives of the law to arrest the inoffensive beggars. The urban development and government measures work together to exploit the poor at the cost of humanity.

The second blow is when the tailors’ shack is bulldozed as a part of slum evacuation programme. They stuff their belongings in a trunk and sinking under its weight, go all over the city in search of place to live in. They realize that even to sleep on the platform they must pay the policeman.

The third blow of Emergency in their lives is when Ishvar and Om are picked by the police from their rented footpath dwelling to work as construction workers for the city beautification project. Ishvar’s protest that they are not street urchins or beggars fall on deaf ears.

The final and fatal blow to their lives is an unwarranted police raid on the market place. Ishvar and Om are forcibly taken to a sterilization camp of the village,

“The hospital wore festive look with loudspeakers and banners. It’s like a mela – little away from the birth control booth is a man selling potions for impotency and fertility.”

Provoked by Om’s act of spitting towards him, the Thakur has a special interest in Om who is suffering from the testicular tumor, say the nurses. Ishvar’s hope of getting a reverse operation done gets sterilized.

“What kind of life. What kind of country is this. Where we cannot come and go as we please,” wails Ishvar.

They return to ‘our city’ with a little trolley fitted with small wheels for Ishvar and a rope for Om to pull it. Dina stays with her brother covering herself with the unfinished quilt recollecting the events and experiences concealed in the rightly knit patches.
Some of the upheavals, like the emergence of competition in the cold drinks business, are a part of life’s struggle. But most upheavals take place due to the imposition of Internal Emergency. All the avowed promises of the Emergency to abolish bonded labor, child labor, sati, dowry system, child marriage and prohibition of the harassment of backward castes never materialized.

Rohinton Mistry makes some revealing political approaches. The alteration in rural life, the change in the aspirations of the lower castes, the attempts by the upper castes to preserve the old order is aptly described. He shows the cynical manipulation of elections in rural India by Thakur Dharamsi:

“On election day the eligible voters in the village lined up outside the polling station. As usual Thakur Dharamsi took charge of the voting process. His system, with support of the other landlords, had been working flawlessly for years.

The election officer was presented with gifts and led away to enjoy the day with food and drink. The doors opened and the voters filled through …. They (the lower caste villagers) placed their thumb prints on the register to say they had voted, and departed. Then the blank ballots were filled in by the landlords’ men. The election officer returned at closing time to supervise the removal of ballot boxes to the counting stations and to testify that voting had proceeded in a fair and democratic manner.”

The author shows the involvement of insensitive bureaucracy in the demolitions of slums, forced labor camps and sterilization drives. Senior administrators from the Family Planning Centre rebuke doctors for not achieving targets. Operations are conducted with partially sterilized equipments due to the harsh warnings of bureaucrats who are only interested in targets and not human suffering. Thakur Dharamasi’s misuse of authority shows that the trend of criminalization of politics and politicization of crime started in the period of Internal Emergency. The novel hints that constant oppression by the upper castes leads to violence and uprisings by the lower castes. When Ishvar goes to register a complaint at the police station about his nephew’s castration, the constable on duty is perturbed:

“He wondered if this meant a fresh outbreak of inter - caste disturbances and headaches for his colleagues and himself.”
So in a way there is a hint of the rise of the numerous Dalit Senas in several states in India, as retaliation against the upper caste oppression.

The novel focuses on not only the oppressions of casteism but also on how life in Mumbai adds to the woes of the common man. Rohinton Mistry, “finds Bombay oppressive and overcrowded.” When he went back to Canada he told Hancock that Bombay had appeared very grim and bleak to him, “Bleak was the picture I created when I was here. That’s exactly the way it is.” The underprivileged section of Bombay does not even possess one square of land to live comfortably.

“Eight or ten people in a small room. Sleeping one over the other on big shelves, from floor to ceiling, like third – class, railway berths. Or in cupboards, or in the bathroom. Surviving like goods in a ware house.”

The writer presents Mumbai – the huge slums with cooking smoke, the long queue for water, accompanied by quarrels, lack of basic amenities, open air toilets, the familiar sights of beggars with their begging bowls and the Beggar Master paying the police every week to avoid harassment. The description of the Beggar Master training his beggars and dressing them with a variety of wounds manages to raise a laugh. Joblessness and hunger makes Ishvar and Om migrate to Bombay like Rajaram who says,

“Thousands and thousands are coming to the city because of bad times in their native place. I came for the same reason” and “the city grabs you, sinks its claws into you and refuses to let go.”

Their lives in Mumbai symbolize the anguish, pain and restlessness of people cut off from their native village. Like nomads, they moved from Nawaz to their slum dwelling, railway platform, entrance of a chemist’s shop and finally Dina’s flat. They are caught between two worlds – native village which they abandoned because it held a bleak chance and Mumbai failed them despite promises – they remain trivials unable to discard the old and to find peace in the new.

Along with dreadful life in Mumbai, the novel focuses on the display of various forms of power and violence. Power in the novel is mainly of five types: exploitative, manipulative, competitive, nutrient and integrative. Exploitative power is the most prominent and is associated with force in the novel. The potential of violence is
inseparable from exploitative power. The wave of the Thakur’s in Dukhi’s village is a
good example. They achieve it through recurrent violence – beatings, torture, rape etc. The
killing of Narayan is notable for the raw savagery of their power. The Monkey Man
tortures his animals, the two monkeys, Laila – Majnoo and the dog, Tikka. Later, he
substitutes two children, thus extending cruelty to humans. The Beggar Master leads a
team of mutilated beggars. They surrender their earnings to him. His cruelty is well known.
The landlord harasses Dina but never appears in person. His power is embodied in the
thugs and a rent collector who terrorizes the tenants. Their power manifests as violence
when they beat up Ishvar, Om and Maneck and vacate Dina’s flat. The Beggar Master
offers protection to Dina but has to be paid in return. Paradoxically, his protection to Dina
operates through violence wrought upon others; that is, the landlord’s ruffians.

If exploitative power depends on violence, manipulative power occurs more
secretly. Nusswan illustrates this power. He runs the Shroff household after his father’s
death. He regulates Dina’s life and tried to compel Dina into marriage. Her widowhood
forces her to approach Nusswan for help. His monetary assistance helps him retain his
hold. Dina herself is not beyond manipulative moves. She is careful not to give Ishvar and
Om undue importance even though they sustain her own existence. She does not allow the
two to know her suppliers or market. Manipulative power is more sophisticated as
exemplified by Dina’s strategies of using kindness to overcome any resistance from the
tailors.

A third kind of power is competitive power and can also be constructive as it
produces a healthy rivalry between people, thus improving productivity. Dina’s attempts
to squeeze out profits from her small business enterprise are regulated by the constant
threat from other similar businessmen. Shankar, the mutilated beggar, is highly regarded
by the Beggar Master because he is the best earner in comparison to others. Government
officials in the novel compete with each other to perform more Family Planning
operations. The Kohlah family ruins its business because they do not foresee competition.
Here absence of competitive power spells doom.

In the relationships discussed above, nutrient power is also there alongside
other kinds of power. For instance, Dina’s brother, Nusswan, in spite of his manipulation,
cares for her. He frequently helps her out of difficulty, is concerned for her safety and
health, her lonely life and future. Dina is not merely an exploitative employer but later she
allows the tailors to stay in her tiny flat even risks Nusswan’s wrath, feeding the two later
reduced to beggars. The Monkey Man adores his pets as his own children. The Beggar Master is actually quite protective towards his “wards,” as the handicapped Shankar keeps repeating.

Throughout the novel, the government’s exploitative power, cruelty and evil of political machinery is emphasized. The government installed to protect actually robs, hurts and kills.

Integrative power suggests opposites – may come together in a synthesis, in May’s terms as “power with the other.” In the novel, the synthesis occurs among the marginalized and the exploited. For example, Narayan and two other lower caste villagers rebel against the Thakurs. Dina and the tailors barely manage to keep poverty away by their unity. The doctors are exploited since government policy forces them into unethical activities through threats. The doctors unite against the victims of Family Planning by refusing to take their complaints seriously.

The novel is tragic since integrative power is never successful. The rebel lower caste villagers are tortured and murdered. The landlord manages to evict Dina. The victims of the forced sterilization programme do not get justice. Mistry creates the types of selfish characters who benefit with others’ woes like the Administrator, the Facilitator, the Motivator, the Slum – Lord, the Thakur and Bal Baba. Each of these men are parasites feeding on the helplessness and gullibility of common man, destroying those who dare to question their ideology or defy their commands.

In postcolonial India, the plight of common people has not changed and they face the same exploitation and injustice as in the rule of colonizer, as one of the character says, “Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed.”

It seems as if the native rulers have merely replaced the foreign rulers and the government has failed to resolve the basic problems of poverty, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy and disease. There is a pathetic picture of near - naked slums, with meager possessions, lean babies, hungry and crying whom the parents fed with “half rotten bananas and oranges and scraps scavenged the night before.” The wounds of India are shown obviously,

“Outside the platform, a woman sat in the sun … drying her laundered sari,
one half at a time. One end was wound wet round her waist and over her shrunken breasts, as far as it would go. The drying half was stretched along the railway fence.”

The writer describes the saga of a poor old man who underwent a vasectomy and his groin filled up with pus which led to his death. He went in for this operation because of cash bonus and gifts; to help with his granddaughter’s dowry, again, portraying the shameful aspect of Indian society.

The Indian society is decaying from top to downwards. The corrupt leaders have exchanged wisdom and good governance for cowardice and self – enhancement. For votes and power they play with human lives and accept money from businessmen needing favours. The pre – election speeches for leaders are crammed with false promises of powerful laws. For them, “passing laws is like passing water, it all ends down the drain.”

The state dictates its supremacy even at places of entertainment like cinemas to establish Emergency. Maneck and Om are stopped and made to listen to the national anthem being played when the members of the audience, rush to the exit door at the end of the film. A group of Shiv Sena, the nationalist extremists block the door and force the audience by warnings likes:

“Respect the national anthem! Your motherland needs you during the Emergency! Patriotism is a sacred duty!”

Emergency forces itself on society, depends on enforcement of patriotic ideology to justify its policies. The castration of Om aims to repress productivity and power of the nation to suspend their democratic rights. They are denied even the basic right of procreation during Emergency. Suspension of the democratic rights has turned a blind eye to justice so that when they complain to the police, the poor are sent to the Family Planning like wanderers in a strange land. There, the doctor says:

“If we start believing you, then all the eunuchs in the country will come dancing to us, blaming us for their condition, trying to get money out of us.”

Along with Emergency politics, through Maneck, we come across the politics in education. Avinash teaches Maneck how to survive at the college, as well as to play chess. Conditions in the student hostel are squalid. When Avinash joins a new group,
‘Students for Democracy,’ he discovers that not everyone believes in democracy. There are “goon squads” of students who take away Professors who condemn the Prime Minister’s actions. The campus newspaper is attacked; flag-raising ceremonies become mandatory and Professors are forced publicly to support the Prime Minister and her programmes. The final straw for Maneck comes when a mob one night shuts him in a freezer. He returns to college when he becomes Dina’s paying guest. He is unable to survive when he encounters the cruelty and terror of religious, sectarian and governmental violence. Finally, Avinash’s death and the destruction of his entire family, drives Maneck to suicide. Through Maneck and Avinash, Mistry gives us a glimpse into the evils of Indian campus: the shameful ragging, nepotism in staff hiring, bribery for admissions, sale of examination papers, special privileges for politicians’ families, government interference in the syllabus and student politics in the campus.

The novel also presents four instances of politics in religion leading to conflicts. These include the struggles between Hindus and Muslims, oppression of the lower castes, the marginalization of Parsis and the massacre of the Sikhs. After freedom, the Partition riots broke out. The second problem involves the caste system. The lives of Ishvar, Om, and Narayan are governed by the responsibilities and prohibitions of their caste. The third problem is the marginalization of the Parsis. Although discrimination against Parsis is less than the untouchables, it is still noticeable in the novel. The oppression of the Sikh minority is the fourth religious problem in the novel. In June 1984, faced with violence led by Sikh militants, Mrs. Indira Gandhi ordered a military operation — “Operation Bluestar” - aimed at capturing Jarnail Singh Bindranwale, the Sikh leader, hidden at the Golden temple at Amritsar. Militarily, Operation Bluestar was successful since Bindranwale was killed and the terrorists were driven out of the Golden Temple. Politically it was a disaster: the temple was damaged and the Sikh believers felt humiliated. The novel shows the violence against the Sikhs and their death.

Violence is used as a tool of politics and takes many forms in the novel. Dina’s violence is generally seen in her sarcasm towards Nusswan. Maneck resents Dina’s motherly advice and restrictions and is often rude. Om smarting about their employee status under Dina is also rude.

There is an “eco – violence” also. Kohlah’s village on the mountains loses its pristine beauty under the guise of beautification and progress. The Government violence uproots people from their homes in its city – improvement drive. Maneck’s suicide is
violence against his self.

There is a gap between the passing and application of laws. The speeches made during the Parliamentary elections are crammed with promises: promises of new schools, clean water and health care; promises of land for landless peasants, through redistribution and stricter enforcement of the Land Ceiling Act; promises of powerful laws to punish any discrimination against, and harassment of, backward castes by upper castes; promises to abolish bonded labor, child labor, sati, dowry system and child marriage. However, these hollow promises turned out to be lively entertainment for the villagers. Voters are bribed to ensure victory in the elections. One learns about a candidate who loses the elections in spite of giving away 5000 shirts and dhotis to voters as these were not of a standard quality. Exploitation of the low-castes by upper-castes continues. As one of the villagers puts it:

“Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals.”

According to the Indian Constitution, as mentioned in the first chapter, Directive Principles need to be considered while passing laws. Indeed, when India translates these principles into reality, it can justify being a ‘Welfare State.’ One wonders if the lower castes are really getting justice, is there employment for all, are children really getting educated, is the government really protecting the environment? Is democracy existing in the right spirit or is it that we have adopted it only on paper? The common man is just a pawn today in the game of politics. Politics has not affected only the Chamars or the other lower classes. It has engulfed one and all equally. No matter to which caste or class one belongs to. Are people like Dukhi getting justice? Are people like Om, Ishvar, Rajaram having employment? Is Maneck and his family satisfied and happy? The novel questions the very foundation principles of the Indian Constitution.

The dominant imagery in the novel is that of a cloth with zigzag stitches and strange designs. Om in one of his desperate moments says:

“If time were a bit of cloth I would cut out all the bad parts, snip out the scary nights and stitch together the good parts, to make time bearable. Then, I could wear it like a coat and always live happily.”
The book leaves us at the end with uncomfortable issues, with an even more uncomfortable question: where do we draw the line “between compassion and foolishness, kindness and weakness?”\textsuperscript{64} After witnessing atrocities on outcasts, women’s faces being ruined by acid, and slum people being forcibly sterilized, the reader gets the impression that Emergency with the capital E is but a metaphor for a society where every day is experiencing a new Emergency. Yet one could not find a better way to conclude a comment on Mistry’s work than by quoting Iyer’s words:

“(…) 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 his book will look at the poor – in any street – in quite the same way again.”\textsuperscript{65}

All is not hopeless in the novel. All the characters are fighting for their survival during the dreadful times of Emergency and its aftermath. Om and Ishvar are begging and are feed by Dina at Nusswan’s house. Maneck unable to face the situation has committed suicide and represents the survival of the fittest. Bal Baba has set up an ashram and has become a spiritual ‘guru’ and has several followers to his credit. The slums have settled again. Emergency has ended and democracy is back with a new government. Life is in motion inspite of several setbacks and Emergency has not completely crushed the spirit of people.

The next chapter portrays the bureaucratic culture and how politics affects both the bureaucrats and the common citizens which in turn exploit the system itself.
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