Chapter – 4

The Rise of Parochial Tendencies in *Storm in Chandigarh* by Nayantara Sahgal and The Brutality of Tyrannical Politics in *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry.

**The Rise of Parochial Tendencies in *Storm In Chandigarh* by Nayantara Sahgal**

Nayantara Sahgal, the second of the three daughters of Mrs. Vijya Laxmi Pandit, this ‘angel faced’ niece of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, is a writer of very sharpened sensibilities, who has brought fiction to new dimensions which underline a rich heritage co-mingled with strong western impact. She is a prolific writer. She has to her credit eight novels, two biographies, two political commentaries and a large number of articles, contributions to various newspapers and magazines. She is a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Rich Like Us* and the Sinclair Award and the commonwealth Award for Eurasia for her novel *Plans for Departure*.

Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps the only Indo-English woman novelist who is also a political columnist. As a political columnist her newspaper articles are characterized by their topicality, simplicity and boldness. She makes a point of keeping in touch with the latest political controversies and her writings are often presented in the best tradition of western liberal journalism. As a novelist her contribution to Indo-English fiction lies in writing novels that mirror faithfully the contemporary Indian political scene. She seeks to present in each of her novels a consistent point of view, and moves from satire and irony to a positive constructive vision. Her’s is indeed a post-Independence sensibility, born of the new challenges the Indian were faced with after gaining Independence.
Sahgal does not profess any specific political ideology nor does she propagate any definite political values, or reveal futuristic anti-utopias. She neither glorifies ancient India nor exhibits chauvinistic nationalism. Her novels portray and interpret contemporary political realities and explicate the somber mood and widespread disillusionment of the post-Independence generation. Unlike ideological novels, her works are endowed with greater artistic objectivity. Politics can be called her “primordial predilection”, the central point of whatever she writes. That is why almost all the major characters of her novels are drawn irresistibly to and deeply involved in the vortex of politics. Against this backdrop, she analyses and interprets various political events with an intelligent and perceptive mind and reads the individual responses of the characters to these events with the unusual sensitivity of a mature artist.

Nayantara Sahgal’s work ranges from factual and emotional autobiography to fictionalized autobiography. In her address to the colloquium at Radcliffe Institute she had this to say about the close link in her life and writings:

I grew up during the national movement. My parents went to jail repeatedly during our fight for freedom. My father died as a result of his last imprisonment released too late to be cured of the serious illness he contacted in jail. My uncle became our first Prime Minister. I was born and brought up within the atmosphere and hopes and ideals of the Congress party. Its leaders were familiar to me. Our home was their meeting place and many decisions momentous to India were taken in it. I became a novelist and a political journalist, and all my writings, fiction and non-fiction, has been about contemporary India.¹

*The Storm in Chandigarh* is one of the best political novels written by an Indian in English. It deals with the partition of East Punjab on linguistic lines just when the state had recovered from the trauma of the 1947 partition. The novel centers on the theme of forced linguistic bifurcation of Punjab twenty years after its first post independence communalistic partition. The
forced linguistic bifurcation of the communally truncated Punjab into two States-Punjab and Haryana with Chandigarh as their common capital rouses passions equal to the other greater partition at the time of independence. The story, though primarily belongs to the political part of the narrative, is vitally and unwittingly involved in the private lives of the characters also. Thus, it is rightly mentioned on blurb:

The novel is delicately juxtaposing the ordinary pain of individual existence with the larger anguish of the political turmoil of the region. Nayantara has created a book of great beauty.  

The novel shows us the clash between Gyan Singh, the powerful Chief Minister of Punjab and Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of Haryana. Chandigarh, the joint capital of the Hindi speaking people of Haryana, and the Punjabi speaking people of Punjab, is the scene of action. Vishal Dubey is an intelligent administrative officer who has been assigned the task of bringing out an accord between the two warring factions and to restore peace and harmony among the people of Chandigarh.

The fight between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is a fight of ideologies. It is a fight between the cult of violence and the ideal of non-violence. Nayantara Sahgal brings out the evils of hypocrisy, pretence and snobbery existing at the human level. The novel affirms the endless possibilities in human life both at political as well as inter-personal level. The novelist’s primary concern is the confrontation of human spirit in a changing cultural milieu. As Jain remarks:

Sahgal’s work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of the society exposed for the first time to both freedom and power.  

In Storm in Chandigarh, Vishal Dubey, the young intellectual Indian administrative officer, is the protagonist whose point of view remains fairly
constant throughout the novel. Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of the Punjab and Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of Haryana together with the Home Minister of Union Government in New Delhi act out their political roles. Prasad, Trivedi and Kachru complete the set of Civil servants, who fully represent the bureaucracy in the central Secretariat, both old and new. The most important and interesting characters are, however, neither the politicians nor the civil servants except Dubey but the well-to-do business magnates and their high living and thinking executives.

Mrs. Sahgal’s point of departure in this novel is the dramatically forced linguistic bifurcation of the Punjab twenty years after its first communalistic partition in 1947. Her chosen artistic moment is the critical confrontation between Gyan Singh, the violent Chief Minister of the Punjab who has announced a General Strike in the whole region in order to demonstrate his political strength and Harpal Singh, the sedate Chief Minister of Haryana. The scene of action is Chandigarh, the joint capital of the Hindi speaking Haryana and the Punjabi speaking Punjab. The Union Home Minister, who modestly calls himself a “relic” of Gandhian past in modern Indian history, assigns the task of effecting a re-approachment between the two warring factions in the Punjab to Vishal Dubey, an honest and upcoming central officer, already with an established reputation of being a trouble-shooter.

The novel opens with the Union Home Minister’s statement: “violence lies very close to the surface in the Punjab.” Violence that was so common a feature on the national scene during the sixties, that becomes the central concern in Storm in Chandigarh. As mentioned:

Outbursts of brutal, calculated violence had become a feature of the cities. There were too many in the congestion and chaos who had nothing to lose by violence, too many others who sat inert and indifferent, their sap sucked dry, watching it mount and ebb like some great tidal wave, waiting for it to engulf them...Violence had become
routine and unexpected. It was given different names-indiscipline, unrest, disorder. It was dealt with each time and forgotten. 

Mrs. Sahgal concentrates in this novel on the artistic value of violence in the context of political events as well as ordinary human relations. The confrontation between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is more significant than a mere clash of personalities. It is, more fundamentally, a conflict of ideas: the cult of violence and the creed of non-violence. Gyan Singh, who symbolizes the former, is a political murderer in league with the very devil of money and power. His moral turpitude and political rascality date back to the partition days of 1947 and continue to shrink and shadow his conscience even when he occupies the highest democratic office in the Punjab. As success is the measure of a man’s political worth, he achieves it by hook or crook, though many of his opportunities have been rather fortuitous. An uneducated truck driver, to begin with, Gyan Singh has played successfully, if unscrupulously, the roles of a political campaign-manager, ironically enough, for Harpal himself on an earlier occasion, and of an industrialist; and now is the Chief Minister of the Punjab. Gyan Singh is a megalomaniac whose visions of grandeur and glory and supreme strength have to be realized only in a negative fashion. A call for a general strike is his characteristic way of demonstrating strength. As Dubey says:

What Gyan plans is a demonstration to show the strength of his demands. He’ll call it off once he makes his point. It’s a political trick, not a mass movement. 

Due to the strike, how the uncertainties of general life consequent on political machination are depicted nicely by the novelist. As Saroj puts it succinctly:

Oh, I’m not worried about any great disaster. I’m afraid of usual things going wrong, like milk not being delivered and my tins and packets running short, and the iron not working and not being able to get it
It’s when ordinary things go off the rails that life becomes unbelievable.  

In contrast, Harpal Singh has always counseled caution which continues to be his watchword in his career. A stout-hearted integrationist, he is the political counterfoil to Gyan Singh in all matters. He is easily altruistic where Gyan could be cynically egoistic. As he himself recalls, introspectively:

He could not remember a time when he had wanted power. What he had passionately wanted was recognition as a champion of the underdog. And he had earned that.

The two Chief Ministers Vishal has to deal with are not only two persons diametrically opposite in their approaches, they are also two political forces on resorts to the methods of intimidation and suppression of the political opponents by sheer brutal force. The one stands for opportunist shrewd and diplomatic politician, whereas the other stands for justice, broader perspective and liberal outlook. Vishal evaluates the political situation as well as the principal characters. Sardar Gyan Singh, the Punjab Chief Minister, as Vishal discovers, is an unscrupulous opportunist who would let patriotism “go hang”, stint at nothing if it can advance his personal and political interests. He cuts on impressive figure at the conferences and is mentioned in the newspapers as “a living monument to the urban working class, a man who has risen from the ranks, yet remained one of the people in his dizzy rise to power. In an age that is conscious of the needs of the common man, Gyan is its most distinguished representative in the country.

Pitted against him is Harpal Singh, the Haryana Chief Minister – a sober, broad-minded gentleman with concrete and definite political aims, a true patriot whose loyalty to the nation is unquestionable. He protests against the split and believes that there is something sinister at the root of the partition-mentality and those who uphold it.
Sahgal, with a clever and imaginative use of the actual historical happening of the 1960s, leads the principal characters of the political sub-plot to a climatic point. India which had vowed to adhere to the Gandhian order of non-violence is portrayed as a country where confusion, disorder and chaos is wide-spread, where people have turned to be a furious, stone throwing, factory burning mob. By juxtaposing the situation in the country in 1947 and the one during the post-independence period, the novelist draws an appalling and bleak picture of the present where the politicians, with blinkers of self-centeredness on their eyes, have become oblivious of their responsibilities towards the country and its people. In 1947, ruminates Harpal Singh that there was still an Indian left to serve. Now there is no such vision left to bind us. The big vision has disintegrated. The conflict between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is thus not merely a political battle; it is a battle of philosophies.

In a generation in which leadership means strength, force and authority, people like Harpal are thrown in the shade every time. Gyan’s threat for strike becomes a reality. In the evening the violent strikers make an attempt on Harpal’s life. He is luckily saved, but badly injured. Ironically when he regains consciousness he learns about the Union Home Minister’s death and is told that Gyan Singh has called off the strike “as a token of respect for the death of a patriot.”

The “storm” on the political plane thus abates temporarily. Dubey feels an intense personal grief. To him the funeral of the old Minister—“the last surviving figure of the Gandhian era” symbolizes

…more than a state funeral. It would mark the end of an era unknown as Gandhian. In politics that had meant freedom from fear, the head held high, the indomitable Will in the emaciated body of India…If all of that had been worth anything…It will have been disbursed over this country, down deep into our blood.
Nayantara Sahgal firmly believes that the fate of the three patriarchal institutions, the family, the society and the state are interrelated because cooperation between the family and the larger society is essential, else both would fall apart. Sahgal in the novel chooses as said by Narendra:

An important juncture in history of India is a vantage point to juxtapose the past and the present in order to review the progress of contemporary generation.¹⁰

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Chandigarh is very much symbolic of its practical approach to the problem of violence in all the three practical approaches to the problem of violence in all the three patriarchal institutions. Chandigarh, the city which was a helpless victim of the two partitions that took place within a period of two decades – the grueling partition of 1947 on the basis of religion and the cumbersome partition of the 1960’s on the basis of language. Chandigarh, designed by Lei Corbaiser, ironically juxtaposes the puniness of the people and the grandeur of the architectural patterns thereby questioning how successful democracy is, superimposed on illiterate masses, exploding millions of them. It is a typical representative of the cities of the modern world where outbursts of brutal calculated violence have become a routine and expected. Thus, it is not only a symbol of terror and uprooting, but also a symbol of the journey of recovery.

According to Mrs. Sahgal violence is given different names-indiscipline, unrest and disorder. Like Gandhiji she also thinks that violence means “to cause pain or wish ill to or take the life of any living being out of anger or selfish intent.”¹¹

In *Storm in Chandigarh* even the first Home Minister of the Independent India, who is in-charge of the law and order situation of the country humbly considers himself as the student of the subject as he thinks that he has never had much experience of violence in his life. The Home Minister manages to understand that the quarrel between Punjab and
Haryana, just carved out of the former Punjab over issues like boundaries, water, electric power is merely superficial whereas the conflict between Gyan Singh, the power craving megalomaniac politician and Harpal Singh, the passive and the vacillating Chief Minister of Haryana, is the real problem to sort out. Mrs. Sahgal clearly points out that the first generation of leaders of the Independent India has failed the nation by allowing politicians like Gyan Singh to enter into the folds of Congress.

Mrs. Sahgal Describes the emergence of Gyan Singh as an invincible force in the national politics. During the partition of India in 1947, he simply utilizes the terror of the public by transporting them to the safety zones. Soon he finds out that politics would provide ample opportunities for him. As he knows that carnal savagery has an important role in the election campaigns, he terrorizes and exploits the public which is in panic. Finally he is successful in dividing Punjab into two states only to satisfy his ambition of becoming the Chief Minister of a State in spite of the opposition of the present Chief Minister of Punjab, Harpal Singh. Mrs. Sahgal clearly proves that the very narrowness of Gyan Singh gave his arguments a crude strength that no larger vision could ever have. According to her this is the violence of attitude which brooks no compromise and rejects all but one solution. Gyan Singh is an appropriate representative of those people.

Who have no feel for the periphery of a problem, for light and shade and the nuances in between that is the source of their energy, and in a queer way, their integrity? 12

Gyan Singh has no respect for the individual. He tries to encash the situation so he transforms satyagraha, the sacred weapon used by Gandhiji to fight against a tyrannical foreign rule, into a demonstration of strength and a showdown, Harpal Singh is forced to think that the only option left for him is to retire from the active politics. Vishal Dubey therefore truely realizes that the battle between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is a conflict between idealism
and pragmatism. He also thinks that the people have not progressed from the cave period as they are in total ignorance about what’s happening to each other. As a result the people like Gyan Singh reach easily to acquire power.

Mrs. Sahgal has also focused on the society how it is divided into classes. The Indian constitution proclaimed that socialism is going to be upheld, the unequal distribution of wealth created a gulf between have’s and have’s-not. Inder, the mill owner thinks only about efficiency and productivity. But he cannot sympathies with the workers who protest against the canteen arrangements and become furious when they find out that they are fed pigs food, shipped from America. Jit, another industrialist also comments:

> When the men are roused they don’t just want a bonus or an adjustment of pay scales, they want your blood if they can have it...Why don’t they get their terms straight? How can they expect a bonus unless the company makes a profit? But profit or no profit it’s a bonus they want. The trade unions should dream up another name for their next demand. 13

*Storm in Chandigarh* deals basically with the problem of political tension and violence originating from its being: Chandigarh, the common capital of the two states – the Punjab and Haryana. Chandigarh, being a new city, has nothing to boast of its traditions. A new type of society has emerged in this town, and the people who have come to live in it have brought their beliefs, ideas and customs with them. This has enriched the culture of this town; this has also created a sort of confusion or cultural storm here. For instance, Indian people have adopted themselves to the domineering role of English language. It is the direct result of the British rule and is one of the most modern features of Indian society. But it has not completely eroded their love for native languages. It is this love that brought about the reorganization of the earlier Punjab into Punjabi–and Hindi–speaking states were also the result of traditional thinking of people like Gyan Singh who yearned to call his soil his own in the language of his fore-fathers. And it was again the traditional
outlook of the Indian leadership that delayed the formation of this new state and in the process impaired the already frail frame of national unity. One of the most traditional features of Indian society is that people can still be provoked to fight and finish one another on the question of religion and language.

Mrs. Sahgal also explores the value crisis on political and personal planes in the post-independence India in *Storm in Chandigarh*. Values are something that one lives by and every culture is endowed with eternal values, which it seeks to reestablish continuously. Whenever there is a threat—external or internal to these values, individuals as well as nations undertake a frantic search for values. The enormity of threat determines the intensity of search. As the novelist writes:

> It is a search for value…the better value, the real value in any situation, and not just do what is done or what is expected.\(^{14}\)

The novel also makes an attempt to explore the labyrinths of the post-colonial Indian psyche from the socio-political and personal levels of existence. As the novel presents that the colonialism is neither an impending threat nor a concrete presence in India, rather it is something of a haunting and distant memory that has affected all its characters in overt as well as covert ways. Colonial rule not only brought a change in the socio-politico-economic structure of the country but also in order to legitimize this change it propagated the superiority of human individual, Susie Tharu points out:

> No aspect of life in our country has been unaffected by colonialism. It disrupted existing social and economic structures, undermined the political system, forcibly retarded growth and inevitably in the process divested traditional institutions and values of their function in society.\(^ {15}\)

In doing so the colonial rule also negated the existence of traditional values as Frantz Fanon points out:
Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values... The native is declared insensible to ethics: he represents not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. 16

The novel studies the situation from the point of view of three different categories of people corresponding to three different attitudes. One of those who are in their greed for power carried forward the agenda for their imperial rulers. They proved even more dangerous for they appealed to the same passions and emotions that were active in the years of freedom struggle, and turned them against Gandhian principles and traditional values of integrity and harmony, thus subordinating principles to individual ambitions. In the novel, this is represented on political plane by Gyan Singh the Punjab Chief Minister, a ruthlessly unprincipled man though endowed with a strong and imposing personality and an impressive voice. The second group comprised of those who were opposed to this opportunist attitude, but comprehending its serious proportions preferred to stay passive, because to them also their political interests were no less dear. In the novel, this group includes Harpal Singh, the balanced Chief Minister of Haryana. The third category is of that elite class of Indian youth who in spite of their ability to analyze the ancient values in the light of changing times and their rational attitude failed to strike a balance between their ingrained convictions and the world around as they were few in number. This group is represented by Dubey.

Gyan Singh, the uncouth Chief Minister of Punjab in the novel, belongs to that category of national leaders who have in their lust for power merely stepped into the shoes of their imperial rulers, at times giving wind even to divisive tendencies to suit their purpose, thus subordinating principles to individual ambition. He is successful in reaching out to the masses, because he knows how to exploit their love for traditional values and their immediate passions for his own ends. He evokes feelings of Punjabi integrity because he wants power. He purchases property and hires it because he wants money.
He wields authority. Thus norms of morality and values have no meaning for him. His own ends are all he is concerned with.

A general attitude of irrational adoration and admiration is much to be blamed for this state of affairs as a consequence of which politicians like Gyan Singh succeed in exploiting masses. Gyan Singh uses history to weave an atmosphere. On the other hand, Harpal Singh, a more rational and upright individual fails because instead of evoking the past (as Gyan Singh does), he shows his people a vision of the future and “a juster but vaguer range of possibility could seldom hold out against the violent immediate claims supported by the obvious.” Thus, the society portrayed in the novel is a society caught between the two worlds- ‘one dead and the other powerless to be born.’

The values of any society are determined by the preferences of the people of that society and the need of the time. In the post-independence phase while the traditional Indian values did not fit the changed circumstances, the western values were not acceptable to masses. Tremor of discord between these opposing sets of value can be felt at all levels of existence in the novel. It has given birth to the violence of attitudes. It happens in the case of Punjab and Haryana where the attitude of people in refusing to understand the actual hues of the problem and reject all but one solution.

Moreover Chandigarh stands as a very important symbol. It embodied a dream of progress and perfection. But the ensuing storm signifying an erosion of those dreams proves that any attempt at imposition of order and balance from outside is a mere illusion and it is only a matter of time before the whole façade crumbles down. The Chandigarh architecture becomes synonymous with Indian democracy for Dubey:
That was architecture transplanted not conceived here and he wounded how successful democracy was superimposed on illiterate masses exploding millions of them.\textsuperscript{18}

The reason why India’s freedom or marital alliance or Chandigarh architecture fail is that all these are attempts to combine the best of the west with the best of ours without any attempt at achieving the inner harmony of spirit. Thus Fanon theorizes:

If nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley…”\textsuperscript{19}

It’s these blind alleys born out of deep discrepancies among mass passions, individual choices and socio-political needs that the novel attempts to capture.

Mrs. Sahgal has woven the political consciousness into the total fabric of the novel more skillfully. In this novel “storm” is directly related with the political situation of the bifurcation of the Punjab into Punjab and Haryana with Chandigarh as a common capital. Chandigarh itself becomes a symbol of an alien order. For men like Harpal Singh the starkly simple lines become symbolic of a terrifying angular coldness in the new order. A confusion and disorder hang over the Punjab as Gyan Singh attempts to introduce a new order in \textit{Storm in Chandigarh}. Portraying the actual situation in 1960s of the separation of Punjab and Haryana, \textit{Storm in Chandigarh} builds on another situation of post-independence chaos. India is strike ridden and the disorder of a non-violent movement now takes the turn of a stone-throwing, factory burning mob. Harpal Singh, the new Chief Minister of Haryana State, ex-Chief Minister of old Punjab State has seen a more gracious form of disorder. Gyan Singh now Chief Minister of new Punjab State, ex-Industries Minister of the old Punjab State causes chaos as he clamours first for a separate state, then for a separate language (Hindi for Haryana and Punjabi for the Punjab) and
for the acquisition of Chandigarh as the capital of the Punjab. In this process, the Gandhian value of non-violence is put to the acid test. Mrs. Sahgal here concentrates on the artistic value of violence in the context of political events. As A. V. Krisha Rao avers:

Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps one of our best socio-political novelists of to-day. She is authentic and vivid in rendering the contemporary Indian urban culture with all its inherent contradictions and imposed controversies. 20

In short, *Storm in Chandigarh* reveals the author’s deep concern for the fast fading impact of Gandhism in political and social life. The novel is historical and not merely fictional – the culmination of the populist, parochial, obscurantist forces brought to a head by the government policy of the linguistic reorganization of the states of the Indian Union. The novel traces the growth of abrasive political culture percolating upwards from the states to the Centre. The novelist succeeds not only in rendering into fiction the political issues of the late sixties, but also in capturing the zeitgeist, the political mood and intrigues of the post-independence era. She succeeds eminently in exposing the politicians and bureaucrats on whom rests the onus of the transition from servitude to freedom but today they are divided not on principle or convictions, but by nauseating hypocrisies. The novelist also analyses and interprets variegated aspects of political life in depth and through her active involvement in politics she emphasizes the humanistic values she also upholds and the novel becomes a concern for the quality of life.

**The Brutality of Tyrannical Politics in *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry**

Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a significant literary figure during the 20th century. He was born in India in 1952 and came to Canada from Mumbai in 1975. There he lived in Toronto and took employment in a bank in Toronto. As a literary figure, his four important works has gained him an immense significance. His first published collection of short-stories entitled *Tales From
Firozsha Baag followed by his novels Such A Long Journey, A Fine Balance and Family Matters.

Rohinton Ministry has won many awards for his writings. His novel A Fine Balance received Giller Prize and in the following year Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book. It was also short listed for Booker Prize and Irish Times International Fiction Prize. As a writer who lives and writes from Canada, Mistry’s writings focus mainly on India. Like many expatriate writers, he continues a relationship with his country in his writings and has enriched his readers’ understanding of it. As a member of Parsi Community, Mistry writes about the state of Parsi Community within the boundary of India. To quote Dr. Jaydipsinh Dodiya:

One of the most remarkable features of Rohinton Mistry’s fiction is that it brilliantly captures the crowded, throbbing life of India. 21

For Mistry, like other Parsis, India is the adopted land for shelter because of the religious persecution of the community in Iran. India with its enormous varieties figures a lot in Mistry's fiction. Having lived in Canada since 1975, Mistry preserves the memory of his early days in India alive. In an interview with Veena Gokhale, he tells her how he has kept the memory of India alive and vivid enough to work in the minute details that his novels contain in abundance:

In general, I don’t think there is much one can do to keep memory alive - memory lives and dies on its own. Memory is a strange thing : when assumed to be dead, it can surprise one by returning to life. I am speaking, of course, not of memory that is concerned with things like street, names, film songs etc. These things can be found in maps and books. I refer to those moments which, at the time of actual occurrence, may have seemed banal, but which, given the gift of remembrance, become moments of revelation. My novels as not 'researched' in the formal sense of the word. Newspapers, magazines, chats with visitors from India, chats with people on my infrequent visits
to India – these are the things I rely on. Having said that, “I will add that all these would be worthless without the two main ingredients; memory and imagination.” 22

Mistry prefers to write about India, which engages his imagination. Living in Canada and writing about India. Mistry is fully aware of several drawbacks of India’s social and political life, as is discernible in his novels.

A Fine Balance has been carved out artistically by Rohinton Mistry. The novelist has covered the most volatile and violent spectrum of the contemporary history, which shook the social – political stagnation of the country. Mistry’s own concept of India in the Emergency apparently seems to be larger than life size, a mixture of joy and woe, heaven and hell. The novel is remarkably intense and enigmatic in delineating its colourful characters like Shroff, kahlah or the tailors. The hidden desires of the underdogs and their long cherished aspiration for delightful life weave the centrality of the novel. The novel brilliantly presents a panoramic picture of the poor struggling for their ‘survival of the fittest’ in the metropolitan city where ‘a roof to cover the head’ is a dream.

The novel explores a troublesome decade beginning with 1975 and concluding with an epilogue in 1984. Rohinton Mistry has taken only those facts into account, which can be helpful in portraying the gloomy and glaring saga of the country during Emergency. As he said to Gokhale in an interview:

It seemed to me that 1975, the year of Emergency would be the next important year, if one was preparing a list of important dates in Indian history. And so it was 1975. 23

The subject of this novel is simply to describe: the horror and cruelty of sub-continental life, especially as lived by its poor and vulnerable. Thematically, the novel articulates the sagacity of the cultures which are very much suppressed. Simultaneously the novel deals with the life and longing of
the middle class which craves for honour and dignity. In addition to this, the age-old problem of caste and communalism, the brunt of which has been borne by the down trodden, has been duly focused. Mistry perceives India as "metropolitan, sophisticated, noisy and angry."

*A Fine Balance* opens with a chapter entitled 'Prologue 1975' and ends with 'Epilogue 1984'. Set in Indira Gandhi’s India and written with compassion, humour and insight, it is a vivid, richly textured and powerful novel written by one of the most gifted writers of our time. The novel has sixteen chapters spanning the lives of three main characters over a period of ten years. Spatially spread over and unnamed coastal metropolis, a nearby village and a small city in the Hills, the novel gives grisly details of the infamous Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi and life in the slums of the metropolis including castration of Omprakash and death of the monkey man.

The fine balance of the title of the novel is struck by opening the book with the stoppage of the suburban train service because of suicide by an unidentified character and closing the book with a similar stoppage of train service due to a suicide by one of the main young aspiring characters whose dreams of India are shattered so badly that he decides to commit suicide. Moreover in the epilogue, the country’s history too is seen to have travelled a full circle—from 1947 when a Muslim has to abandon his fez because sporting a fez in a Hindu neighborhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one to 1984 when a Sikh has to give up his turban, to cut his hair and shave off his beard to escape being massacred by the goons seeking revenge for the murder of Indira Gandhi. As T. Vijay Kumar notices: “*A Fine Balance* is a depressing novel set in a depressing period of Indian history.”

The novel starts with Mistry telling the story through the cynical voice of the student Maneck, sent to study in Bombay staying as a paying guest at Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow. At the same time, the tailors Ishvar and Omprakash, seeking refuge in Bombay due to caste violence in their village,
get employment at the house of Dina Dalal. Thus these characters from different class backgrounds start interacting with each other and get interconnected. The four main characters of this novel suffer from a sense of rootlessness. Oppressive caste violence has driven Ishvar and Omprakash from their traditional occupation to learn the skills of tailoring and from a rural background to overcrowded Bombay. Similarly Maneck moves from the invigorating atmosphere of his home in the hills to Bombay for higher education. Dina has grown up in Bombay but her sense of independence after her husband’s accidental death keeps her away from her family. Social circumstances, loneliness and a sense of uprootedness bring them together and forge a bond of understanding to maintain ‘a fine balance’ in their lives. In this process, the author implies that at various levels of existence, there is a see-saw struggle between happiness and despair. Life never seems to follow a placid course in A Fine Balance.

There are always upheavals, whether at the slums where Ishvar and Omprakash reside in Bombay or problems of food and political disturbance at the residential block at Maneck’s college, amongst the beggars in the streets or the emergence of competition which shatters Maneck’s monopoly of the cola drinks in his hometown. However, in A Fine Balance, most upheavals take place because of the imposition of Internal Emergency. The evictions of the poor from the cities, the forced labour camps, the sterilizations are the manifestations of the Internal Emergency. The novelist also shows a nexus that emerges between the police and the established hierarchy either the upper dominance in the villages or the land/building mafia in Bombay.

Mistry also tactfully portrays the victimization of four major characters – Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck Kohlah, at the time of Emergency. Ishvar asks Dinabai:
What is this Emergency we hear about? Government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn’t affect ordinary people like us” –replied Dinabai. 25

They all believe that the oft heard word Emergency is a sort of game played by the power centre and it would not really affect the ordinary people like them. Hence each in his way tries to connect the pervading discomfort and insecurity to their problems of the here and now. Thus, Emergency, a defense of an insecure leader, disturbs the coherence of routine life of the average people. As B. Indira observes:

All of them are aware of something stifling their lives though they cannot link it to the existing political scenario of the country. Their struggle for survival, as far as they are concerned, doesn’t have a political angle to it. Very soon when their simplest dreams get thwarted they are forced into realizing the mayhem created by Emergency. 26

With the depiction of Emergency, Mistry makes some revealing political insights. The transition in rural life, the change in aspirations of the lower castes, the attempts by the upper castes to preserve the old order is aptly delineated which is mentioned through a major instance in the violence perpetrated by Thakar Dharamsi and his henchmen against Narayan’s family during the week of parliamentary elections. During the election Narayan tries to assert his democratic right and cast his own vote. For his defiance, Narayan and the other two "Chamars" are forcibly gagged, flogged and tortured and they were hanged in the village square. Then the ‘Goondas’ of Thakur burnt the family of Dukhi (Narayan and Ishvar’s father), Roopa, Radha and the daughters. Here Mistry implies that the needless arrogance of the upper castes in trying to maintain social supremacy led to the consolidation and emergence of the Dalit consciousness in Indian politics. As Novy Kapadiya writes:
The social tensions in the villages, the changing aspirations of the lower castes and caste based violence, is so well delineated, so well woven into the flow of the narrative that it makes Rohinton Mistry a very astute political novelist. 

*A Fine Balance* is anchored in the post-independent India and more specifically in the days of Indira Gandhi’s rule with Dina Dayal and other characters, who suffers a lot because of political disturbances around them. Most of the events in the novel revolve around a predicament of a layman. K. Ratna Shiela Mani observes:

Mistry narrates the story in a masterly fashion and the reader is shuffled between various time phases that mark each major historical upheaval. He highlights crucial events in the country’s chronicle by depicting the background of each of the major characters. Ishvar and his nephew Om are from the village; Maneck is from a hill station in the north, while Dina lives in the metropolis. The lives of the tailor’s forefathers reflect the tyranny of the caste system in rural India where unimaginable horrors are perpetrated on the lower castes. Oppressive caste violence has driven Om Prakash and Ishvar from their traditional occupation of working with leather to learn the skills of tailoring in the town. However, dwindling avenues of work in the town bring them to the metropolis. Maneck comes to the city for higher education. In Maneck’s background also lies the pathetic story of India’s partition. Dina’s story is one of struggle-struggle to safeguard her fragile independence from her autocratic brother Nussawan; and protect her flat from her rapacious landlord. Her story is symbolic of the rebellion of the young women against their subjection. Each member of this quartet aspires in changing society to transcend the constraints of birth, caste, sex in a modern, urban world where anything seems possible.

The ending of the novel is startling and unconventional. Maneck, the brooding Parsi young man is upset at the alienation from his family. His sorrows increase, when he visits Mumbai and finds that Dina has been evicted from her house, has lost her struggle for independence and now stays
with her brother. Walking away from Dina’s house, he is further perturbed at seeing Ishvar and Omprakash handicapped and working as beggars. The culmination of these series of staggering events is that it drives him to extreme despair and he commits suicide by throwing himself in front of a train. Here Mistry intends to show 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.’

Rohinton Mistry does put the Emergency (1975-77) in his fine balance and tries objectively to weigh it through a variety of weights and counterweights. Mistry’s deft handling of Internal Emergency provides a vivid and graphic picture of the turbulent times when most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers were put behind the bars to enable Indira Gandhi to retain power.

The beginning of this most horrifying and shameful period in modern Indian history in the novel is so sudden that the characters cannot quite comprehend what it really means. Some of them think that it is merely a "government tamasha". Initially some of the people, especially those living in comfort, were happy at the improvement in punctuality, the instilling of a sense of discipline in the nation through measures like checking of ticketless travelling, improvement in industrial relations due to fear of the police, etc. Nuswan Dalal thinks that all these measures are necessary, for "to make a democratic omelet you have to break a few democratic eggs". 29 To which Manek Kohlah thinks out a reply, "A democratic omelette is not possible from eggs bearing democratic labels but laid by the tyrannical hen". 30

The managing director of a multinational, as reported by Nusswan, has gone to the extent of suggesting the elimination of at least two hundred million people by giving them a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide. Mrs. Gupta, a rich lady enjoying every comfort of life thinks that "The Emergency is a good medicine for the nation".31 The views of the rich are believed by the actual
sufferings of the masses symbolized in the preparation of 'shish kebab' with chunks of lamb and liver on the brazier placed over the burning coals.

How they glowed, thought Maneck – live creatures breathing and pulsating. Starting small, with modest heat, then growing to powerful red incandescence, spitting and snapping their tongues of flame cracking, all heat and passion, transforming, threatening, devouring 32

During Emergency, the government implemented MISA that enabled the government to take any one into police custody. As a result all those opposed to the power—that—were put into jails. For instance, Nawaz, a tailor, is arrested by the police on the pretext of smuggling gold from the Gulf. In fact the poor tailor has only asked the influential customer for his payment. The answer from the stall owner is revealing:

With the Emergency, everything is upside – down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There's even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure 33

It is a graphic picture of a mass revolution beginning, reaching its climax and lastly being completely suppressed. This is what could have happened during the Emergency. But it did not happen, at least not to that extent. The cancer of corruption and criminalization of politics, which had already been eating into the vitals of the nation, flares up in the Emergency and spreads its tentacles far and wide, often with a nod of official approval. The roots of the Emergency lay in the effort to subvert the low and to retain power through wrong and illegal means. Avinash, a student leader, remarks:

Under the pretext of Emergency, fundamental rights have been suspended, most of the opposition is under arrest, and union leaders are in jail.... But the worst thing is, the press is being censored. 34

The hoardings of Indira Gandhi and the painting of Government slogans are just the outer trappings which cannot deceive people. A campaign
with a euphemistic name, ‘City Beautification Scheme’, actually results in the bulldozing of the slums and forcing the roofless poor to pass their rights on pavements or railway platforms, carrying, like Ishvar and Om their things in boxes or bundles every day to their places of work. When a party worker tells this to men and women, the reaction is interesting:

The Prime Minister’s message is that she is your servant, and wants to help you; she wants to hear things from your own lips. "If she is our servant, tell her to come here!" someone shouted. 35

But in spite of their protests the people are forced, wherever necessary with caning and slapping, to board the buses taking them to a Rally where they get very meager payment, practically starve for the whole day and also lose their day’s earning in the bargain. Such incidents, which are by no means isolated, create a sense of disillusionment and disaffection among the masses. This is really forced labour for which practically no payment is made on the contrary they were compelled to listen pseudo talk justifying the need of Emergency by Indira Gandhi:

There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make things better for ordinary people. Only the crooks, the smugglers, the black marketers need to worry for we will soon put them behind bars. And we will succeed in this despite the despicable conspiracy which has been brewing since I began introducing programmes of benefit for the common man and woman. There is a foreign hand involved against us, the hand of enemies who would not wish to see us prosper. 36

The text also brings in the problems of overpopulation and Mrs. Gandhi’s son Sanjay’s ingenious solution to it-vasectomies all the men in the crucial age-group and all will be fine. Mistry goes on to show how this vasectomy drive intensified during the Emergency imposed by Mrs. Gandhi and proved to be the undoing of the tailors. It is seen through certain camps to
which the people are taken by force, where family planning operation could be held under the guise of free medical check-ups. In such camps bachelors or even people about to be married are operated upon, sometimes even castrated at the instance of powerful people. The Family Planning Programme is used to eliminate the enemies of the establishment. It is clear from the way Om is first sterilized and then called again at the behest of Dharamsi, only to be castrated under the pretext of a free operation to save his life, which is not only pathetic but inhuman and unbecoming of a doctor as Om is a bachelor and his marriage is about to be solemnized. His uncle Ishvar’s entreaties to the authorities to spare Om remain unheeded. As a result, both Ishvar and Om become cripples and turn to begging only to fall into the nightmare anonymity of the city "a world of sudden police swoops, forced labour, goonda gangs, protection money, and casual street murciers." 37

The Hospitals follow standing orders to put down the cause of any death during Emergency as accidental. As such, Ashraf Chacha’s death at the market square by severe beating at the hands of the police is described as accidental. The new rules of Emergency make it obligatory for every officer to encourage people to get sterilized to complete his quota otherwise there will be no promotion. Thus Family Planning Programme is pressed into service to eliminate one’s enemies by confusing sterilization with castration.

Mistry makes a serious note of the gap between the passing and application of laws. The speeches made during the parliamentary elections are 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 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 labour, child labour, sati, dowry system, child marriage. 38
However, these hollow promises turned out to be nothing but campaigning antics assuring lively entertainment for the villagers.

Elections here are master-minded by the landlords like Thakur Dharamsi. Narayan’s alterpt at voting to make his mark himself results in the ruin of his family by being burnt alive by the goondas of Thakur. The police find ’nothing’ to support charges of arson and murder. So no F.I.R. can be registered. In fact the police is at the Mercy of ’dakoos’ like Dharamsi. 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 the voters as these were not of a standard quality.

Despite new laws regarding untouchability passed by the government, nothing has changed. Exploitation of the low-castes by upper-castes continues unabated. The refusal of low-castes Buddu’s wife to go to the field with the zamindar’s son, results in the shaving of her head and being paraded naked through the square. Again the way Roopa, Dukhi’s wife, is raped by the watchman of the orchard. Untouchability is deeply rooted in the village community. It is still a society of four varnas. They can’t mix otherwise, there would be chaos. 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. 39

Ishvar and Narayan receive terrible beating from the teacher for defiling the tool of learning and knowledge. It is a forbidden world for the low-caste. Dukhi’s complaint to Pandit Lalluram is futile. However Dukhi’s defiance of the caste system by sending his little sons Ishvar and Narayan to Ashraf is a welcome step in the right direction. It is significant to note that only Ashraf, Muslim tailor in town, sews clothes for Dukhi as no Hindu tailor would sew for an untouchable. The suggestion is that the curse of untouchability is deeply ingrained in the Hindu psyche. Even the Parsi widow, Dina Dalal, is capable
of feeling for untouchables by giving shelter to Ishvar and Om, the two chammars. People like Lalluram have to come out of their shells of hypocrisy if the line between the touchables and the untouchables has to be really erased. Otherwise, it will be difficult, not impossible, to realize the dream of Mahatma Gandhi, which is possible only by breaking the timeless chain of caste.

Apart from these, the lives of all major characters of the novel are blighted by the Emergency. It leaves Maneck Kohlah crushed under the train. Dina Dalal a prematurely old and purblind, slaves her years out in the house of her brother. And the two poor tailors struggling only for a livelihood are utterly-crushed-Ishvar and Om converted as beggars on the streets for small charities, till death comes mercifully to release them from this burden called life. Avinash is also one of the victims of the Emergency Rule. His parents are not rich enough to offer dowry to his three unmarried sisters who are ultimately forced to commit suicide. Mistry has created Vasantrao Valmiki’s character to explain the significance of the title *A Fine Balance*. His words in the novel are quite meaningful revealing the trauma of Emergency as well:

There is always hope—hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost. After all, our lives are but a sequence of accidents a clanking chain of chance events. A string of choices, casual or deliberate, which add up to that one big calamity we call life. 40

Thakur Dharamsi is a political character in the novel. He is a symbol of tyranny, exploitation and injustice. People like him flourished a lot at the time of the Emergency. Ratna Shiela Mami says:

The upper caste leaders connive with the bureaucracy to preserve their interests during the Emergency. Thakur Dharamsi achieves respectability as a political leader because he organizes many sterilization camps. His cruel misuse of power indicates the beginning of the trend of criminalization of politics and politicization of crime. 41
It is also depicted that during Emergency, the Indian politicians had tried to surpass one another to meet with Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s approval and some had declared that ‘India was Indira and Indira was India’ and even some ‘intellectuals’ were not laggards in this game. India’s modern painter, M.F. Hussain had painted a series of pictures where he had imagined Mrs. Gandhi as the Hindu goddess, Durga, riding her mount a tiger. This was a rational exercise rather political strategy to impose upon the people that Emergency is the only step to put into practice by the government for the betterment of people only.

Mistry also deals with the trauma of the millions of Mumbai’s unhomed and homeless citizens, whose plight has not changed dramatically for the better since the dark days of the Emergency. The tailors have to sleep rough on the streets, carrying their belongings in a trunk, until Dina finally relents and lets them keep it in her flat. She however, refuses to let the tailors live in her flat for fear of her landlord and her own class and ethnic prejudices. As a result the tailors are rounded up with other homeless people and dragged off to the beggar’s camp. Most of the events in the novel revolve around a predicament of a layman. K. Ratna Shiela Mani says:

Mistry highlights crucial events in the country’s chronicle by depicting the background of each of the major characters. The lives of the tailor’s forefathers reflect the tyranny of the caste system in rural India where unimaginable horrors are perpetrated on lower caste... In Maneck’s background also lies the pathetic story of India’s partition. Dina’s story is one of the struggles to safeguard her fragile independence from her autocratic brother Nussawan; and protect her flat from her rapacious landlord...⁴²

The author appears to have overloaded one pan of his balance with despair, but there is much in the other pan also which is of great value. The Emergency is not an isolated case of tyrannous rule in India. Events like J.P.’s Civil Disobedience movement of 1975 have also been referred to in the novel.
Dina Dalal’s reminiscences go back into history recalling a long chain of events. She does not remember the Quit India movement of 1942 because she was too young, but the horrors of partitions she does remember, and the novelist implies that the Emergency horrors were no match to them. At the personal level too, the murder of Avinash during the Emergency is matched by the suicide of his three sisters for their father had no money for their dowry. The novelist drives home the point that in individual life the lifting of the Emergency has made little difference:

Of course, for ordinary people nothing has changed. Government still keeps breaking poor people’s homes and jhopadpattis… Living each day is to face one emergency or another.  

Apart from the Emergency, the Anti-Sikh Riots in Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi too which killed thousands of innocent people outbalance the Emergency. The assassination of Prime Minister worsens the situation. A taxi driver advises Maneck to shave off his beard. Homicide and arson paralyzed the city-life. The taxi-driver believes that the Prime Minister deserves her fate: "She gave her blessings to the guns and bombs, and then these wicked, violent instruments began hitting her own government…"

It is also noted that the upper class people are fascinated by the Emergency. For them it is a magic word, capable of curing all diseases and decay. The students were euphoric too for a different reason. They felt that by following Jaya Prakash Narayan, they would bring in a change which would invigorate all society, transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism. Savita Goel Rightly remarks:

*A Fine Balance*, set in Indira Gandhi’s India and more specifically during the time of emergency is a stark and moving portrait of life during this period. It reflects the reality of India- the predatory politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and blood-shed.
The novel carries sub-plots which are also directly or indirectly related to the Emergency. In the story of Beggar master, the chief of beggars and Shankar's brother who is a very influential person who protects Dina Dalal when her landlord plans the strategy for eviction. Beggar master is murdered. Another sub-plot that *A Fine Balance* contains is based on story of Rajaram, the hair collector, who happens to be the neighbor of Ishvar and Omprakash. He cannot earn enough money by way of sale of hair. He goes to the event of killing. He becomes a motivator for family planning, which destroy the lives of many innocent people. At last he renounces the world and becomes Bal Baba—a sanyasi.

*A Fine Balance* is a microcosm of life in general and political disturbances, which Mistry 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 on in the name of discipline, beautification and progress in a democratic country. The harshness of Emergency on Indian Political arena is observed with a quotation, from Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot* in the begging of the novel:

Holding this book in your hand sinking back in your soft arm chair, you will say to yourself; perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes. You will no doubt dine well blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not fiction. All is true.46

While going through the politically most sensitive aspect of the novel i.e. Emergency, it can be said that *A Fine Balance* weaves together a tale of the 1970s India and the midst of a state of Emergency through the lives of its four characters. The Emergency intrudes obtrusively into the lives of all of these characters leading to their eventual loss and destruction. The overall scenario is grim. *A Fine Balance* thus, reveals the dark period of Emergency (June 25, 1975 – March 21, 1977) which remains a blot on the history of post
– Independence India. It also throws light on the dirty political game played by the so-called bigwig politicians during the Emergency that made common man insecure and unsafe.
References


2) Sahgal, Nayantara. *Storm in Chandigarh* (Blurb)


5) Ibid., p. 167

6) Ibid., p. 45

7) Ibid., p. 42

8) Ibid., p. 240

9) Ibid., p. 239


11) Gandhi, Mahatma. *Young India*, 4 October, 1928


13) Ibid., p. 36

14) Ibid., p. 82


18) Ibid., p. 212
23) Ibid., p. 4
30) Ibid., p. 373
31) Ibid., p. 352
32) Ibid., p. 610
33) Ibid., p. 299
34) Ibid., p. 245

161
35) Ibid., p. 258
36) Ibid., p. 327
37) Ibid., p. 537
38) Ibid., p. 143
39) Ibid., p. 142
40) Ibid., p. 652
42) Ibid., p. 192
44) Ibid., p. 582