

A Fine Balance

Unlike the Partition of India of 1947, much has been written about the “Special Internal Emergency” of 1975 – 77 and suspension of civil liberties, by then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Amongst these, Rohinton Mistry’s fictional work A Fine Balance stands out, for its unique history-from-below take on the situation through the perspective of the poor. This book displaces the notion, which most intellectuals held at that time, that 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.¹ This logic was often used to condone 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!² It was looked upon as a necessary and equitable force, which was required to ‘fix’ the problem of the post-colonial Indian state, which had been a constitutional experiment since the demise and departure of the British Empire.

In fact, by depicting the struggles of the four main protagonists and numerous socio-economically challenged characters, during the Emergency, and how it dealt a blow to their already limited capacities and options of having a better future, the author succeeds in conveying his point of view. Though his drama starts out in the “city by the sea”³, which the reader can easily identify as Mumbai⁴, but the author adds that “they

¹ Ashis Nandy. “Indira Gandhi and the Culture of Indian Politics” At the Edgy of Psychology. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980) pp. 115 – 116.

² Shashi Tharoor. India, From Midnight to the Millennium. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997) pp.33 – 36.

³ Rohinton Mistry. A Fine Balance. (New York: Random House Inc, 1996) p 4.

⁴ Political correctness I guess!

could have been anywhere”⁵. This, the author does, to inform as well as warn the readers, that the horrors that follow the characters in Mumbai are not local, but a global haunt for the underprivileged. This brings to the reader, the unsettling thought and confirmation, that for the marginal people “Living each day is to face one emergency or another.”⁶

Indira Gandhi’s regime saw a dilution of the commitment to Gandhian ideals and also allowed an over-riding pragmatism enter Indian politics in an unprecedented way. The need for achieving economic self-reliance inherently conflicted the notion of democracy, and placed economic achievement above civil liberties.⁷ Mistry uses upper-middle class characters like Nusswan, Dina’s businessman brother, Mrs. Gupta and Thakur Dharamsi to show the effects of this logic, which wasn’t uniquely held by the government, but supported by intellectuals and the middle classes as well.

The first discussion of the emergency starts off in the book with this:

“Dinabai, what is this Emergency we hear about?” “Government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn’t affect ordinary people like us.”⁸

This shows, to the reader, that the common man was alienated from the working of the democracy and did not really associate himself with the various instruments that the government used.⁹ The poor rather wanted to stay away from it and hoped or maybe believed that he would remain unharmed. Mistry is ingenious in bringing up this quaint notion, that democracy was a luxury, reserved only for the elites, and then harshly, but rightfully dismissing later in the book! Mistry exposes the most horrifying facets of the

⁵ Mistry p 4.

⁶ Mistry p 571.

⁷ Nandy p 119.

⁸ Mistry p 75.

⁹ Sunil Khilnani. “Democracy” The Idea of India. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999) He talks about how the Elections have reduced to a mere devise.

Emergency, suffered mostly by the poorer sections of society, which have only been partially and superficially covered in historical texts.

In A Fine Balance Mistry uses a very descriptive, no-holds-barred approach and does not overlook any of the unpalatable atrocities of the Emergency. His realist view point and writing style shines through his portrait of the Emergency which was studded with forced sterilizations and vasectomies brought home with sinister Family Planning clinics and distribution of radio transistors, the City Embellishment program, गरीबी

हटाओ । देश बचाओ ।¹⁰, which was soon referred to as “Remove THE Poor, Save the Country” and led to the elimination of slums to make way for Five Star Hotels or more lucrative designs, the MISA, “Maintenance of Internal Security Act [...] Allows detention without trial, up to two years. Extensions also available on request”, which permitted media censorship, and imprisonment of anyone opposed to the Emergency.¹¹

The most horrifying acts of the Emergency and its repercussions are felt by the main protagonists. Ishvar and Omprakash the two characters from the lowest strata of the Indian Caste system – Chamaars, have tried hard to move up the social ladder to that of a tailor. But their life is fraught with peril and they have to leave the village, where their family is burnt alive, in search of a better life, first to the town and then to the metropolis. In the big city, Ishvar and Om have to live under ghastly conditions. They are rounded up and taken away from their slum dwelling in the city to a labor camp by the City Embellishment program. The scene reminds one of the way ranchers round-up cattle.

¹⁰ This roughly translates to – “Remove Poverty, Save the Country!” – in English.

¹¹ Mistry p 560.

This is not where their misfortune and torture ends. After being rescued from the camp by BeggarMaster, the leader of a band of beggars, Ishvar and Om are forcibly picked up from the town square (where they had gone to find Om a bride) to fulfill the daily quota of sterilizations. The operations are done in less than sanitary conditions and Ishvar's legs then become affected with gangrene and both his limbs have to be amputated. The description is particularly grotesque as the author mentions "From the groin to the knee the flesh had become black"¹². The political clout of the village Zamindaar, Thakur Dharamsi is quite evident here when he directs the doctor to operate upon Om too, who is a mere youth, waiting to get married. There is no escape from this vicious forced sterilization scheme, the pet project of Indira's beloved son, Sanjay Gandhi. Ashraf Chacha, a grand old man, also goes through a vasectomy and loses his life after the operation.

Such is the lawlessness during the Emergency Sergeant Kesar, tells Dina Dalal that "Lots of people have disappeared in the Emergency"¹³ This exchange takes place after Dina tries complaining to the Police Sergeant about the goons who were threatening and trying to evict her from her apartment. The Sergeant does nothing about the situation, other than patronizing her by asking her to thank her stars that she wasn't harmed! As a result of the disabling and incapacitation of Om and Ishvar, Dina's has to close her sewing shop and she goes bankrupt. She is forced to leave her apartment, which she had help on to, for twenty long years of hardship, after the death of her beloved husband, Rustom K. Dalal. She is faced with her worst fear – losing her independence. After loosing her business and apartment as well as business, she is forced to live at her

¹² Mistry p 530.

¹³ Mistry p 560.

brother's place. Dina loses her struggle to keep up against her brother's domineering nature and symbolically loses a card game¹⁴ to her businessman brother Nusswan, who is able to make a domestic servant out of her. The author uses this plot to remind the readers about the subordination of the middle class ideals and hopes to the agenda of the business elite.

The fourth main protagonist, Maneck suffers the loss of his beloved foothill Himalayan town, which has been sacrificed to the altar of Economic Development. In the name of bringing modernization, roads were built that polluted the town and ruined the serene and lush environment. The coming of multinational firms meant shutting of shop for successful, yet small, business like that of Maneck's father's Cola Company. Maneck's every loss is a loss for the Indian middle class, whose morality, hopes and desires, he embodies. His death at the end of the novel is shocking but insightful of the losses that the Indian middle class has borne and still continues to suffer. It makes one wonder, "maybe Maneck was right, everything did end badly"¹⁵

There is another shock that awaits Maneck, before his death. When he comes back to India in 1984, for his father's funeral, he is witness to mob violence and arson against Sikhs in New Delhi, as Indira Gandhi has been murdered by her Sikh bodyguards. He picks up old newspaper at home to find it rife with attacks against Indira over human rights violations and other misconducts during the Emergency. But these attacks are short-lived and Indira Gandhi is duly exonerated as she is re-elected Prime Minister in 1980, after having lost the democratic elections called in 1977, right after the emergency. It was in these old papers that Maneck found news about Avinash, his idealistic activist

¹⁴ Mistry p 565.

¹⁵ Mistry p 546.

friend who had gone missing during the Emergency. It was reported by the police that he died in “a railway accident”¹⁶ 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”¹⁷ He concluded that Avinash was tortured and killed in police custody for anti-Emergency and anti-Indira slogans and demonstrations. Such was the situation during the Emergency that along with all civil liberties the fundamental rights were taken away from the common man. The police had become an ally in the Governments depressing record of human rights abuse. Those entrusted with the protection of the poor had become their worst enemies! This sad story doesn’t end here; Avinash was the only son of a poor retired government employee. With three sisters, Avinash was entrusted with earning enough money to pay dowry for all his three sisters. Avinash’s death, forced his three sisters to commit suicide and save their father from the financial hardship as well as social stigma of not being able to provide dowry for his daughters. This is the psychological trauma that Avinash’s old parents have to go through. This is just one story out of the many ghastly tales that Mistry brings to us.

Mr. Valmik Rao, who, along with Avinash, is representative of the intelligentsia, loses his eyesight as well as voice. This is a very symbolic tool that the author uses to underscore the impotence of the Indian intelligentsia, during the Emergency and even later. The dramatic prose of this editor, lawyer, political slogan writer, summarizes the pitfalls of our history, which is riddled with selective memory and short term amnesia. It selectively ignores the repercussions on the poorer citizens of the society. This quote of Mr. Rao comes to mind – “The Prime Minister cheats in the election, and the relevant law

¹⁶ Misty p 584.

¹⁷ Misty p 584.

is promptly modified. *Ergo*, she is not guilty. We poor mortals have to accept that bygone events are beyond our clutch, while the Prime Minister performs juggling acts with time past”¹⁸

BeggarMaster, the thuggish leader of an army of beggars and mutilated people is the closest embodiment of the functions of the state in the book. Through his character, Mistry is able to critique the roughish nature of the overgrown and overburdened post-colonial Indian state. However what is interesting is the fact that the BeggarMaster is able to protect his dependents and look after them, must better than the ‘Official’ state is! With the gruesome murder of BeggarMaster by Monkey Man, I believe that the author is making a major statement. He is suggesting a move away from the elitist top heavy, insanely one-sided logic of economic development to a more benevolent and liberal state or prophesizing a forced fall of the, supposed, democratic State. Also very unsettling is the way BeggarMaster 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.”¹⁹

The author also talks about the deification of Indira Gandhi during the Emergency and dynastic politics in India. Indira is portrayed as “Mother India”²⁰ and her son, Sanjay as “Son of India”²¹. After the death of both mother and son, the other son Rajiv Gandhi, comes to power as Prime Minister of India in 1984. While talking about the organization of one such rally, poor people are rounded up from slums and forced to board busses and go to a god forsaken village in the middle to nowhere to feign interest in Indira Gandhi’s

¹⁸ Mistry p 553.

¹⁹ Mistry p 493.

²⁰ Mistry p 264.

²¹ Mistry p 264.

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ramblings and also to avoid blows. 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 for Indira Gandhi couldn't keep up their promise, of five rupees and some snacks, how they could expect the people to understand and accept Indira's false promises!

India does not require unplanned economics growth and sacrificing the poor-man at the altar of "Common Good". What it needs is, to bring equality, justice and the basic amenities to its underprivileged and deprived. "In the end, it's all a question of balance."²²

²² Mistry p 229.

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