Personal and National Destinies in Independent India

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A Study of Selected Indian English Novels

By

Rositta Joseph Valiyamattam

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To India, My Motherland...

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PREFACE

"After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"
— T.S. Eliot, 'Gerontion'

The study of Indian English literature and of Indian politics during my graduation and post-graduation days reinforced my keen interest in the Indian citizen and the Indian nation. The fact that my PhD Research Director, Prof. B. Parvathi nurtured a passion for the nation proved extremely providential. This gave me the impetus to pursue my dream of a literary study directly relevant to my country. After several intense discussions, we decided upon a study of how the life and destiny of the individual and the life and destiny of the nation-state in independent India, are presented as being intricately intertwined in select Indian English novels.

The need for such a study, especially in these times of global turbulence, vast inequalities and deep conflicts, wherein the ideal of democratic nationhood is under serious threat, is attested to by several significant facts. At the outset, historians and scholars are unanimous about the marked paucity of comprehensive studies on the socio-political history of post-independence India, especially from the perspective of and documenting the contribution of the masses. Secondly, the Indian novel in English has always been a faithful mirror of changing individual and national lives and sensibilities, deeply concerned with the nation's destiny. Transcending native language barriers, it has formed a truly Indian literature that expresses the quintessential soul of the nation. Thirdly, the novels selected for this study have been published in the 1990s and after. The Indian English fiction of this period deserves greater analysis not only for its foregrounding of the Indian experience on the global stage, but also for its deeper amalgamation of personal and national histories. Distinctions between the private and the public or political, the elite and the ordinary disappear as these novelists attempt to defy conventional hegemonies and rewrite contemporary history from the viewpoint of the marginalised. The post-1990 era is a turning point in Indian history, marked by the influence of economic liberalisation and globalisation and by the deeper involvement of the individual citizen as a more active and powerful agent on the national scene. Hence, the 1990s and the new millennium provide a

vantage point for a retrospective view of national events since independence, from an objective distance.

The novels selected for the study present a wide cross-section of Indian national life from 1947 to date. They are - Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990), Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* (1990), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Meher Pestonji's *Pervez-A Novel* (2002), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* (2006) and *Six Suspects* (2008), David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) and, Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* (2009). These novels encompass almost the whole of India from North to South and East to West, from villages to metropolises. They comprehensively depict varied epochs in Indian history from Partition and Independence to the latest national developments. Their protagonists who live in the shadow of or directly engage with these national events are men, women and children, ruling elites and poor masses, minorities, subaltern groups and middle-classes. The common strand uniting these novelists is the conscious use of national history and the fine balance of the private and the public, rooted in their own deep involvement with national issues.

This book seeks to examine and evaluate, with reference to these novels, the intermingling of the personal and the national in a developing young nation-state, the presentation of post-independence national events and epochs, the interface between and roles of citizen and government, post-colonial issues, and the role of literature in national life. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the book has been divided into five chapters, corresponding to the different periods in the history of independent India dealt with in each novel. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction to the historical period covered and its presentation in the Indian novel in English. This is followed by an analysis of the specific novels from three broad angles: the personal and the national, documentation of national history, and the artistic perspective. The analysis concludes with a review of critical opinions and secondary sources, followed by my views vis-a-vis the intertwining of the personal and the national in the novels.

Critiquing twelve novels by eleven different writers against the vast and complex canvas of sixty-nine years of the history and politics, culture and economy of independent India was quite a challenge. Added to this was the difficulty in procuring, deciding on and sifting through the apt secondary sources for a multi-disciplinary study of very recent fiction. The interviews and correspondences with my novelists were highly rewarding

and memorable, reassuring me that my research was headed in the right direction. The first to respond was top diplomat Vikas Swarup, author of *Q&A* (of the Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* fame). He explained how his novels sought to present a microcosm of India and her complex contradictions by employing emblematic universal figures and polyphonic narrative devices. He affirmed the role of literature in becoming the voice of the voiceless and injecting a new perspective into the narrative of national development. Yet, his regard for the individual freedom of every artist was evident. He clarified that his books did not have a message but did have a conscience. Writing to veteran writer, thinker and management guru Gurcharan Das (a fatherly figure) turned out to be a truly unforgettable experience. In a lengthy telephonic interview, while speaking of his craft and concerns as a writer, he delved into the nuances of representing independence, Partition and the early years of nation-building in his novel. His faith in the Indian middle class and entrepreneurs remained intact. He emphasized the need for the citizen to be responsive to even the smallest social issues and to follow the path of *dharma* which he described as the right action at the right time. Deeply concerned over the corruption in the Indian polity, he opined that writers also have a responsibility to rouse national conscience.

Corresponding with Ms. Manjula Padmanabhan, versatile artist and Aristotle Onassis prize-winning playwright was a challenge. This rebel writer, who emphasizes looking at the national narrative from the crucial feminine stance, was exceedingly modest and believed that it is the prerogative of the critic or researcher and not the author to interpret the text. David Davidar, much-beloved editor, publisher and author was generous in his detailed and enlightening answers to my queries about his novel *The Solitude of Emperors*. He opined that being a citizen demands positive, conscientious engagement with social and political issues. He asserted that despite the indifference and persecution to which writers are subjected, they should hold up a mirror to the sins of omission and commission of the powerful.

Receiving words of encouragement from the rather elusive Rohinton Mistry, the famous Parsi novelist based in Canada, was a thrilling experience. He graciously welcomed my interpretation of his novel *A Fine Balance*. Meher Pestonji, noted social activist turned writer, overwhelmed me with her friendliness, goodwill, and the time and efforts she put in to send detailed replies to each of my queries. She emphasized that the central protagonist of her novel *Pervez* was one of those few conscientious citizens who choose to become agents of social change during times of national upheaval. She also welcomed the fact that sixty years after

freedom, Indians have finally begun to assert themselves as citizens of a democracy, taking responsibility for local governance and forcing those in power to become accountable.

In the final analysis, all the selected novelists try to grasp the grand narrative of India with empathy, honesty and precision, carefully balancing art and realism, human existential drama and national chronicles. Their novels testify to the amazing resilience of the masses in a nation wherein the commoner is rendered helpless by an often corrupt mighty polity. What stands out is the assertion of the individual will over uncontrolled powers and unfavourable circumstances. They salute the heroic struggles of ordinary Indians in times of extraordinary transformation. Their sensitivity makes them rise above mere documentary to note the pattern behind the events in Indian public life, to critique the functioning of Indian democracy, to counter colonial legacies and neo-colonialism by narrating the subaltern and highlight both the achievements and the failures of the citizen and the government.

The narratives of the personal and of the national are inseparable from each other. The texts that are the subject of this book advocate an inclusive, humane, cosmopolitan nation-state with a strong moral core instead of aggressive or elitist nationalism. They represent an era of painful awareness, anxiety and interrogation, an attempt to keep the soul of the nation alive. By exposing the harsh realities of the times, they give new directions and inspiring goals to a hungry nation.

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This book is the fruit of the dreams and desires of those who have urged and inspired me to do better each time.

My deepest feelings of gratitude are towards my PhD Research Director, Prof. B. Parvathi (Retd.) former Head, Department of English, Andhra University for her wonderful, inspiring guidance, for her warmth, affection and unstinting support. She has been a Guru and a role-model who has taught me not only about literature but also about life.

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While working on this project, I had the good fortune of interacting with eminent professors, scholars and researchers at varied literary forums like the Researcher's Association, Cuttack and Dhvanyaloka, Mysore. I thank Prof. B.K Das, Prof. M.Q. Khan, Prof. G.K Das, Prof. Rupin Desai, Prof. C.N. Srinath and Dr. Ragini Ramachandra for all the inspiration and encouragement. My heartfelt gratitude to Rev. Dr. Jacob Kani former editor Indian Currents, Delhi and founder-editor of Youth Action, Indore, the editors of Muse India, Dr. Ravi Nandan Sinha of The Quest, Ranchi, Dr. G.S. Balarama Gupta of the Journal of Indian Writing in English and Prof. Prabhat Singh of Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth, Varanasi, for the opportunity to publish research papers and articles in their esteemed journals and anthologies.

It is my pleasure to thank the librarians and staff of Dr. V.S. Krishna Library, Andhra University, the SCILET library, Chennai, the Public Library, Visakhapatnam, the Mysore University Library, the EFLU library, Hyderabad and the library at Dhvanyaloka, Mysore. A big thanks

to the staff at Ashok Book Centre and Pages Book Shop, Visakhapatnam for their wonderful collection of books, for procuring texts for me and bearing with me.

The warmth, appreciation and motivation offered by my current workplace are priceless. I am extremely grateful to the management, faculty, staff and students of GITAM Institute of Management, GITAM University, Visakhapatnam.

I remember with gratitude all my teachers at school and college, especially those to whom I owe my love of English language and literature. Special thanks to Prof. D.J. Chaudhari (Retd.), Government Vidarbha Institute of Science and Humanities, Amravati, Maharashtra, for his faith in me and for being my favourite teacher. I am ever grateful to my late grandaunt Rev. Sr. Treasa Peter JMJ, my uncles Rev. Br. C. D. Michael MSFS and Rev. Fr. Jose Edassery MSFS, and my aunt Rev. Sr. Rositta SH for their prayers and assistance.

A big loving Thank You to my father Prof. Joseph Valiyamattam and my mother Dr. Elsy Joseph Valiyamattam for being the centre of my universe, for always being there for me, for their sacrifices and incredible love, guidance, encouragement and help. I shall always cherish my beloved little sister and best friend Georgitta's priceless assistance as the perfect sounding board for all my ideas. I fondly remember the seemingly endless hours of typing, editing and formatting that we put in together. I owe everything to my family without whom this book would have been impossible.

Above all, my eternal gratitude to God Almighty, who has been merciful to me always. All true wisdom comes from and leads to Him.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The greatest knowledge and the greatest riches man can possess are India's by inheritance; she has that for which all mankind is waiting.....
– Sri Aurobindo

1.1. The Fundamentals

Often enough, the life of a nation has been shaped by its writers and philosophers. Art can never separate itself wholly from social concerns. A work of art may shatter comfort zones and initiate a painful and more meaningful process of thinking and growth. The socially committed artist stands as a beacon amid the darkness of human life. Indian English writers have always, directly or indirectly engaged with contemporary social, political and economic realities. The degree of their involvement might have differed, but they were never shut up in ivory towers while their brethren strove with real life.

Indian English novelists have chronicled the history, socio-political consciousness, changing culture and traditions and socio-economic concerns of India, in the colonial, post-colonial and post-independence eras. While national events occupy centre-stage in some novels, they are merely used as a backdrop in others. At times, it is impossible to separate the fictional element from contemporary national history. The interaction between national events and private lives, as reflected in the Indian English novel, makes for a stimulating study. In this context, this book focuses on how the life and destiny of the individual and the life and destiny of the nation-state in post-independence India, are presented as being intertwined, in select Indian English novels.

The twelve selected novels have been published in and post-1990. Set in post-independence India, they span a period dating from 1947 to the present. These are - Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990), Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* (1990), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Meher Pestonji's *Pervez-A Novel* (2002), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006),

Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* (2006) and *Six Suspects* (2008), David Davidar*'s The Solitude of Emperors* (2007), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) and, Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* (2009). The study of the aforementioned novels, attempts to address the following concerns:

i. Defining 'personal destiny' in post-independence India.
ii. Defining 'national destiny' in post-independence India.
iii. Studying the inter-mingling and intertwining of the personal and the national in free India. This involves examining the mutual interaction between private lives on the one hand, and, major national events or the socio-political forces, mechanism and philosophy of the nation-state on the other hand. An attempt has been made to examine the novelists' views of the roles and interface of government and citizen.
iv. Evaluating the fictional representation of post-independence national realities and thereby critiquing the selected novels as historical documents and post-colonial studies which chronicle India and her people in the post-independence era.
v. Assessing how the selected novels help in understanding a complex nation and exemplify the multi-dimensional role of literature in national life as interface between the private and the public.

Thus, this book deals with those specific instances wherein the life-histories of the individual and the nation-state are woven together. The aim is to examine how recent Indian English fiction has highlighted this process of intertwining. Such an examination is based on certain fundamentals such as - human life and politics, nation, state, government, citizen, and civil society.

Individual life is inevitably related to politics. The word 'politics' is derived from the Greek 'polis' which literally means 'city-state'. In his *Politics*, Aristotle declared that 'man is by nature a political animal' and human beings can live the good life and attain a just society only within a political community. Politics is the art of government and social control through the making and enforcement of collective decisions.

The nation is a central principle of political organization. Nations are cultural entities of people bound together by shared values and traditions, common language, race and culture, religion and history, and usually occupying the same geographical area. Benedict Anderson called the nation an 'imagined community' created by the spread of printed literature and mass media, while Anthony Smith views nationhood as a mythical

symbol which resolves modern rootlessness by offering a collective heritage and identity (Ray 525-534). While the nation is an enigmatic, indefinable idea, nationalism is one of the oldest and most powerful ideologies. It can be harnessed positively as in anti-colonial struggles or employed destructively as in the world wars. The ideal conception of the nation is building a just and free society.

Closely related to the idea of the nation is the concept of the state. In political theory, the 'state' technically implies a human association having four essential elements- population, territory, government and sovereignty. The state has changed its form over time, from the Greek city-state, ancient and medieval kingdoms, monarchies, to the liberal democracies, military dictatorships and communist states of today. There are various theories relating to the origin, nature and objectives of the state. The Social Contract theory assumes that the state is the result of a voluntary covenant for social security on the part of primitive men emerging from a state of nature. The Liberal theory believes that the state is created by free individuals and its power is subject to protecting the rights of citizens. The Marxist theory holds that the state is an instrument of class domination and will disappear when classes disappear. The Welfare State theory focuses on the duty of the state to ensure social justice, especially for the marginalized.

The term 'nation' is often used as a synonym for state. But the nation is an idea which can exist even without being contained within a state.

The state cannot function without a government which exercises sovereign powers and is charged with the maintenance of peace and security. The government machinery consists of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. According to noted economist and political thinker I.M.D. Little, the people constitute the sovereign state and governments must be accountable to them in accordance with the Constitution. Governments are merely agents of the state (Jalan 232).

At the centre of the concepts of nation and state stands the citizen. A citizen is a member of a political community, entitled to its rights and encumbered with its duties. The Republican model based on the views of Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli and Rousseau considers citizenship to be an office wherein law-making and administration in the interests of the highest public good is the primary business of the citizen. The Liberal ideology describes citizenship as legal identity, a set of rights passively enjoyed by the citizen whose primary business is private. In modern democratic states, citizenship is exercised both actively and passively, though high levels of involvement or public-spiritedness are unusual. Modern history proves that the health of a democracy depends on the

ethics of its citizens. However, the fullest expression of citizenship also requires a liberal, democratic welfare state structure.

Civil society is a vital mediating structure between government and citizens, especially in a democratic state. These non-government initiatives challenge abuse of power, cultivate patriotism, and empower individuals and communities to help the government in ensuring public welfare. As B.N. Ray puts it, "...the civil society debate is...about...civic virtue and civic engagement, about what role the ordinary occupations and pre-occupations of citizens play in the public sphere and in building the good society, about the function and place of the associations that make up modern societies. ..... A...vibrant civil society gives the state moral depth and political vitality, even as a justly constituted state creates the conditions in which all its citizens can build a rich world of networks and associations" (Ray 421,437).

An examination of all the above concepts demonstrates that the 'political' and the 'personal' are closely intertwined. Yet, people often feel threatened by the idea of political forces intruding into personal life. However it is now established that participation of all citizens in public life is the essence of freedom, through which the state can be bound to the common good.

1.2. The Story of India

Before focusing on the fictional representation of people's lives in independent India, it would be useful to outline the history of the Indian nation-state. India is the world's largest democracy, a land of snow peaks and tropical jungles, over twenty official languages, twenty-two thousand dialects and over a billion individuals of every ethnic extraction known to humanity, where illiterate masses co-exist with the world's top scientists and engineers, where teeming hi-tech cities thrive alongside countless villages, where both non-violence and bloodshed are everyday realities. Shashi Tharoor asks, "What is the clue to understanding a country rife with despair and disrepair, which nonetheless moved a Mughal emperor to declaim, 'If on earth there be paradise of bliss, it is this, it is this, it is this'? How can one portray the present, let alone the future, of an ageless civilization that was the birthplace of four major religions, a dozen different traditions of classical dance, eighty-five political parties, and three hundred ways of cooking the potato?" (Tharoor 7-9). Nevertheless, Mark Twain wrote, 'India is...the One land that all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for all the shows of all the rest of the globe combined.' (qtd. in Rai and Simon

Epigraph). And Jawaharlal Nehru mused, 'She (India) is a myth and an idea, a dream and a vision, and yet very real and present and pervasive' (qtd. in Tharoor 7-9).

India's hoary recorded history dates back to at least 2500-2000 BCE. India was a cultural idea and a vision of vast wealth that lured foreign conquerors and travellers– the Aryans, Central Asian tribes, Mughals, Persians and Iranians, Arabs and Chinese, Portuguese, French, Dutch and British – to name only a few. India was never a single cultural or political entity and there was or is no single theory of Indian nationalism. Before the British came, she was home to numerous kingdoms and principalities. The British rulers were convinced that there was no Indian nation in the past; nor would there be one in the future. At the same time, the nationalists sought to unite Indians across all divisions and construct one Indian nation.

British rule, formally established in 1857, chained India to the capitalist order designed for the benefit of the colonizers. The improvements in transport, communication, education, bureaucracy and army were negated by the tyrannical and racist approach, the massive pauperization and illiteracy, destruction of native agriculture and industry and draining away of resources. Above all, the British rulers, fearing the unity of the Indian people, sought to "turn province against province, caste against caste, class against class, Hindus against Muslims, and princes and landlords against the national movement" (Chandra 22).

The Indian struggle for freedom from British rule was largely based on the Gandhian principles of truth (*satyagraha*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). This mass-based national movement established the notions of popular sovereignty, civil liberties, parliamentary democracy and representative government. It visualised a self-reliant economy that would be pro-poor, pro-agriculture and pro-industry. It was committed to secularism and religious and cultural freedom. Even as it sought to eradicate casteism and oppression of women, it created the idea of an integrated nationhood strengthened by a diverse heritage. It also advocated a foreign policy that opposed fascism, imperialism and racism. Rooted in tradition and abreast of the latest global developments, it bequeathed to India a tradition of healthy debate and reconciliation of varied political ideologies. Its leaders were drawn from every region and walk of life - rightists and leftists, revolutionaries and oppressed castes, tribals and native princes, spiritual leaders and religious ideologues, rebels, reformers, conservatives and moderates. Men and women like Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Lokmanya Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Subramania Bharati, Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose,

Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, C. Rajagopalachari, Acharya Narendra Dev, Jayaprakash Narayan, Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu and so many others embodied selfless patriotism.

Freedom was won at last by the blood and sacrifices of thousands. However, the British policy of divide and rule finally led to the bloody carving out of the Muslim nation of Pakistan from India. The British handed over power on 15 August, 1947. Jawaharlal Nehru the first Prime Minister of free India, delivered his timeless 'tryst with destiny' address to the nation on the midnight of 14 August, 1947. The Constituent Assembly paid rich tributes to the martyrs and freedom-fighters and to the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi. The whole of India burst into untrammelled, irrepressible celebration.

Ancient India is supposed to have no equivalent of the term 'government', only of the term 'state'. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* outlines the theory of a seven-organ institution of state including kingship, ministry, population, territory, fort, treasury, sceptre and ally (Singh and Saxena 38-40). The modern Indian state is the product of nineteenth-century British capitalism in its imperialist phase. It has also been influenced by pre-colonial civilizations and the nationalist renaissance. It combines "sovereign democratic republicanism, multicultural secularism and democratic developmentalism" (Singh and Saxena 38-40).

The Constitution of India which is the foundation of the modern Indian nation-state and is the longest written Constitution in the world, has evolved from millennia of rich civilizational heritage and the chequered history of over hundred years of struggle for freedom. Framed by the Constituent Assembly of India under the chairmanship of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Constitution came into force on 26th January 1950 and declares India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic. The Preamble to the Constitution solemnly resolves to secure to all citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. The Constitution provides for a parliamentary democracy based on universal adult suffrage. According to Granville Austin, its conscience lies in its commitment to the Fundamental Rights of the citizens and the Directive Principles of State Policy, thus synthesizing individual liberty and public good (Chandra 54). The Constitution envisages India as a federation with a strong centre. The Indian Legislature or Parliament consists of two houses –the *Rajya Sabha* or the Council of States and the *Lok Sabha* or the House of the People. The *Lok Sabha* is directly elected for a period of five years. The Executive power of the Union is vested in the elected President, who is the constitutional head of the state. But these powers are to be exercised in accordance with the advice of the Union Council of Ministers headed by

the Prime Minister, the leader of the majority party in the *Lok Sabha*. The Judiciary consists of a single hierarchy of courts headed by the Supreme Court which acts as the interpreter and defender of the Constitution.

Independence represented a new epoch and vision for India, but was only the beginning of a long journey towards overcoming centuries of backwardness. The people of India started off with confidence and determination following the ideals of the glorious freedom struggle. The immediate goals were to consolidate the unity of India while recognizing its immense diversities and to establish socio-economic justice and equality within a democratic political framework. Many predicted that, owing to the immense diversities, political unrest, poverty, illiteracy and casteism, Indian democracy would be short-lived. Yet, drawing on its libertarian heritage, India overcame its crisis of governability to march towards a better future. Over the decades, with the degeneration in the polity, enthusiasm and expectations have often turned into dejection and apathy. Yet, the achievements of the Indian people augur well for the future of this great country. Historian Sunil Khilnani writes, "Since its inauguration amidst the intense drama, excitement and horror of 1947, the public life of independent India has presented a scene of vivid collective spectacles and formidable individual characters, of unexpected achievements and unforgivable failures" (Khilnani 1). Despite enormous challenges and divisive forces, the idea of a united, democratic India retains great tenacity. India remains a paradox beyond classification or definition.

1.3. Personal and National in the Indian English Novel

In the context of the preceding facts, it is worth exploring the intricate relationship between the personal and the national in the Indian English Novel. The novel, as a literary genre, has a great and unique potential to reveal and critique the contemporary consciousness, crises and hopes of peoples and nations. While historians often focus on the famous and the powerful, novelists fill in the gaps and fissures in the conventional narration of history. They present alternative versions of history that are found on the margins of history texts, the stories of ordinary individual lives impacted by national history and vice-versa.

The Indian English novel originated against the backdrop of British colonial rule and the native Indian Renaissance in the nineteenth century. Therefore, like most post-colonial writing, it consciously or unconsciously took the form of national history. Authentic representation of the natives and of the nationalistic resistance to colonialism became one of its chief themes. Such post-colonial concerns continue to influence even contemporary

Indian English novels. They reflect how even after formal independence, colonialism continues through the capitalist global economy and the native ruling elites, as also, how ordinary citizens are pitted against neo-colonial forces which favour the wealthy and the powerful. Thus, right from the colonial era to the present, Indian English novelists have effectively expressed the hopes and despair of the nation, baring its myriad identities, complexities and paradoxes. They seek to evolve a humane, cosmopolitan nationalism, to celebrate diversity and radical democracy, to canonize and offer strategies of resistance to the subaltern.

The connection between personal life and national concerns has been prominent in the Indian English novel from its inception. Among the earliest novelists were the Bengali writers Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) who harkened back to a glorious past to escape colonial stagnation and forge a vibrant national identity. However, after the 1857 Revolt and with an increase in anti-British nationalist activities during the twenties, thirties and forties, Indian novels began to be increasingly pre-occupied with Indian aspirations for freedom and the freedom struggle. Into this category fall Bankimchandra Chatterjee's patriotic, anti-imperialist *Anandamath* (1882) containing the song *Bande Mataram* that became the war-cry of the Indian revolution, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's (1876-1938) powerful novels of pro-downtrodden social realism, and Rabindranath Tagore's novels- *The Home and The World* (1919) dealing with the revolutionary anti-colonial Bengal of 1905, *Gora* (1923) reflecting the Indian Renaissance and *Char Adhyay* or *Four Chapters* (1934)- a love story set against political fanaticism.

According to M.K. Naik, in the 1930s, there was a sudden flowering of Indian English fiction with the rise of Mahatma Gandhi on the national scene (Naik 7). The influence of the Gandhian age is seen in K.S. Venkataramani's *Murugan the Tiller* (1922) based on peasant life and *Kandan the Patriot* (1932) dealing with the civil disobedience movement in the thirties. Mulk Raj Anand's novels like *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *Untouchable* (1935) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) focus on the plight and reactions of the downtrodden oppressed by upper castes, the rich and the British rulers. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) sensitively portrays the response of Indian villages to Gandhi's non-violent revolution.

Even after independence, novels continued to document the influence of national events such the freedom struggle, the holocaust of the Partition, the tumultuous merger of the princely states and the assassination of Gandhiji, on individuals and communities. Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So*

Many Hungers (1947) deals with the impact of the 1942 Quit India movement and the great famine of the forties in Bengal. Mulk Raj Anand's *Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953) refers to the integration of the princely states into free India. K.A. Abbas' *Inquilab* (1955) focuses on the Gandhian revolution in the 1920s and 1930s. R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) is imbued with the Gandhian persona and mass-movement. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) mirrors the horrors of Partition in the Punjab while his *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1957) depicts the pre-partition days in Punjab. Kamala Markandaya's novels mostly deal with the socio-economic and socio-cultural crises in India just before and after freedom. Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* (1957) refers to the freedom struggle during the 1940s.

However, as Carlo Coppola observes, "Post-independence literature, especially fiction, was forced to account for a perplexing reality. On the one hand freedom had been won..... But on the other hand, writers and intellectuals generally felt that the only change effected by independence was the change in the colour of the exploiters' skin. Writers varied widely in their reactions" (Coppola 3). Disillusioned, many either moved to the left or turned away from national themes to private introspection. Yet, if there were failures in the early years of nation-building, there were also remarkable achievements. Hence, Viney Kirpal opines that most novelists moved from national scenes to personal quests owing to the sense of well-being generated by India's economic, scientific and industrial growth (Kirpal xix). But, later events were to alter the essentially 'esthetic' stance. The sixties and seventies wars with China and Pakistan, the Naxalite movement, the Emergency of 1975-77, the clash of powerful political leaders and popular agitations occasioned an outpouring of patriotic literature. Many novels such as K. Nagarajan's *The Chronicles of Kedaram* (1961), Manohar Malgaonkar's *The Distant Drum* (1960), *The Princes* (1963) and *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), continue the tradition of remembering the colonial rule, the freedom movement and the achievement of independence. Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) reflects India at the time of the Chinese invasion in 1962. Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning* (1965) portrays the corridors of power in the sixties, while her *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) refers to regional conflicts in the same era. Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) reflect decay in the national polity, violent popular agitations and Naxalite insurgency. Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice* (1974), set against the backdrop of the Indo-Chinese war in 1962, is a strong indictment of the corruption in public life in India of the sixties and seventies.

The 1970s and 1980s were turbulent periods and shaped a new Indian consciousness. The 1980s novels have been influenced by the economic crisis, the Emergency, the Green Revolution, the assassination of Premier Mrs. Gandhi, the anti-Sikh riots, regionalism, separatism and fundamentalism. These novels are cosmopolitan and rebellious in form and theme, employing fantasy and sarcasm to face harsh realities. National and international politics is the favourite theme and the displaced modern man is the favourite protagonist. The protagonists are insecure and sceptical on account of the tremendous power that reposes in governments. Against the backdrop of the national Emergency which had emphasized the need to be eternally vigilant about liberty, these novels reflect an urgency to expose false political versions of Indian history and a realization of the citizen's crucial role. Women's liberation, national harmony and the challenges of globalization are other dominant themes.

Among the novels published in the eighties which parallel personal and national lives are Chaman Nahal's *The Crown and the Loincloth* (1981) relating to the Gandhian age and Salman Rushdie's post-modernist *Midnight's Children* (1981) - an extraordinary allegory of Indian history from 1919 to 1977. Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) documents the nation during the Emergency, while her *Plans for Departure* (1985) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988) go back to the colonial era. The post-emergency era, the Janata party government and the separatist movements of the 1980s find place in Pratap Sharma's *Days of the Turban* (1986) and Rafiq Zakaria's *The Price of Power* (1987). Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) revolves around the trauma of Partition in Bengal. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is a mythical, satirical allegory of Indian history from the freedom movement to the Emergency. Gita Mehta's *Raj* (1989) portrays the life of the royalty in British India.

The novels selected for this study belong to the 1990s and thereafter. During this period, while new novelists like Chetan Bhagat, Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur, Allan Sealy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manjula Padmanabhan and others rose to international acclaim, older novelists like Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Amit Chaudhari, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Gita Mehta and others also earned fresh honours. They have given a new identity and universality to Indian English literature.

Novels of the nineties and thereafter, according to Prof. Viney Kirpal, continue the engagement with personal and national histories. They narrate sagas of men and women, families and communities against the backdrop of political power-struggles, casteism and communalism, extremist and

secessionist movements, criminalization of politics, corporate globalization and so on. They continue shocking linguistic experiments and defiance of conventional history, focussing on multiple views, fragmented identities and social pariahs. There is an impulse to deconstruct national history from different perspectives and liberate it from imperialist discourses. Such novels embody attempts to map the nation through individual memories. They represent the anxieties of an entire generation trying to cope with complex social changes (Kirpal 56-62). They are, according to Prof. Jasbir Jain, part of "...Indian literature rooted in Indian reality no longer conscious of the use of English, and crossing over from solid upper middle class positions to explorations of the life of the disadvantaged and marginalised categories....Boundaries between class and class, and between the personal and the political have collapsed" (Jain 18-19). More significantly, the nineties and the new millennium provide a vantage point for Indian English novelists to view post-independence national events from an objective distance.

Among the novels published in the nineties and the new millennium, Chaman Nahal's *The Salt of Life* (1990) and *The Triumph of the Tricolour* (1993) portray the Gandhian age. Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991) refers to national politics in the 1970s. Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* (1992) has references to Sikh separatist politics. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) paints Nehruvian India of the 1950s. Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995) has references to the freedom movement. Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000) is a pungent satire on bureaucratic corruption in contemporary India. With regard to the novels selected for this study, family sagas as in Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) filter national history through private perspectives and foreground the marginalised. There is an attempt to analyse or rewrite received history as in the narratives of partition in Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* or those of the Emergency in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). Politicisation of religion is a major concern and there is a strong sense of guilt not only about narrow-mindedness but also about collective and individual passivity. This is evident in Meher Pestonji's *Pervez* (2002) or David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007) that re-live the Ayodhya dispute of the 1990s. Diasporic writing as in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), while challenging the colonial canon, depicts the anguish of the displaced citizen in the era of globalization. In the novels of Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy, there is a simultaneous shift from the national to the international, questioning the very idea of a definite Indian identity, and, from the national to the

regional, to small towns and downtrodden sections. The acute concern with the degeneration of national life, with injustice and inequality in the wake of a capitalist world order, pervades novels such as Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins* (2009) and Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects* (2008).

All in all, the Indian English novel has been remarkably successful in integrating individual life with public life and reflects the pride in national achievements as also the greater disillusionment with national failures. While there is still hope in the humane, democratic spirit and great potential of the Indian masses, there is also a tremendous sense of rage and despair with regard to the polity and the elite that has largely failed the nation.

1.4. Putting the Study in Perspective

The novels selected for this study present a comprehensive picture of personal and national destinies in independent India. They have been classified thematically and chronologically as follows –

A] From Partition and Freedom to the Emergency (1947-1975)

Famous thinker, management guru and writer Gurcharan Das' novel *A Fine Family* (1990), chronicles the parallel lives of a middle-class family and of a young nation from 1947 to the 1970s. The sagas of Partition and Independence, of nation-building in the 1950s and 1960s and the turbulence of the 1970s, are seen through the eyes of several generations, as both family and nation struggle to build a new future. Acclaimed Canada-based Parsi novelist Rohinton Mistry sets his novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) in the 1960s and 1970s.The dark years of the Emergency directly shape and influence the lives of the central characters who belong mostly to the lower classes. They embody the resilience of the Indian citizen in the bleakest circumstances. Thus, these two novels comprehensively depict the interface between private and public lives in the nation-state in-the-making from the 1940s to the 1970s.

B] The Rural Microcosm: Geopolitics during the Turbulent Decades (1960-1990)

Booker Prize winning novelist and social activist Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is set in the 1960s and 1970s. It focuses on the impact of Communist politics, oppressive feudalism and casteist orthodoxy on the underprivileged in a remote South Indian village. Kiran Desai, another Booker winner and diasporic writer, in her *The Inheritance*

of Loss (2006) depicts the interaction between insurgency, separatist politics, immigration, globalisation on the one hand, and, the lives of citizens in the underdeveloped, volatile North-Eastern region on the other, during the 1960s to 1980s. These two novelists look inward into the remotest rural regions of the nation and examine the impact on private lives of the national turbulence from the 1960s to the 1980s and document the reactions of the commoners to the regionalism, secession, extremist politics and caste/class conflicts which threatened to tear the nation apart.

C] The Urban Dilemma: Religion and Politics in the 1990s

Journalist, activist and novelist Meher Pestonji's *Pervez* (2002) and famous editor-publisher David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007), turn the spotlight on the city. The period is the 1990s - the era of economic liberalization when the lethal mixing of religion and caste with politics had resulted in the rise of fundamentalism. These novels chronicle the response of the urban citizens to the politics of communalism that changes their lives constantly.

D] Understanding Contemporary India: The Wider Canvas Post-2000

Aravind Adiga, Vikas Swarup and Tarun Tejpal have been acclaimed for their novels. Adiga's Booker-winning *White Tiger* (2008), Swarup's *Q&A* (2006) (made into the blockbuster movie *Slumdog Millionaire*) and *Six Suspects* (2008), and investigative journalist Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of my Assassins* (2009) broaden the canvas to encompass both the cities and the villages of India, from North to South and East to West. The setting is India in the new millennium, marked by incredible progress, appalling poverty and a decadent polity. Characters from every walk of life cutting across barriers of age, gender, class, caste and creed - shape and are shaped by the changing contours of the Indian nation-state. The response of the citizens to forces that increasingly alter their fates is effectively captured.

E] Charting a Vision for the Future

After dealing with novels that cover almost all major national issues from 1947 to the present, the study concludes with two novels which do not point to a specific territory or epoch but are extremely suggestive of current Indian realities and also chart a vision for the future. Much-admired playwright Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* (2008), about a dystopia marked by the tyranny of cloned Generals, extermination of women and Nature, and ultra-modern nuclear technology, is a powerful portent. Sahitya Akademi Award winning novelist late Arun Joshi is

famous for his psychological and philosophical fiction. His *The City and the River* (1990) analyzes intensely the roles of the rulers and the ruled. It views the state as a necessary evil but attaches great value to the reformatory role of the individual and presents spiritual politics as a lasting solution to the abuse of power and wealth. Thus these two novels are an allegory of the past, present and future, predicting the possibilities of the post-modern state and preparing the citizen to face these challenges and establish a just, humane, progressive nation.

A critique of the interface between personal and national destinies as seen in national literature, is basically an attempt to document history from the perspective of the masses, departing from conventional elitist versions. The need for such a study, especially in these times of global turbulence, vast inequalities and deep conflicts, wherein the ideal of democratic nationhood is under serious threat, is attested to by several significant facts.

Historians are unanimous about the paucity of comprehensive studies on the history of post-independence India. Ramchandra Guha observes, "...the history of independent India has remained a field mostly untilled. If history is 'formally constituted knowledge of the past', then for the period since 1947, this knowledge practically does not exist" (Guha xxiii, xxiv). A proper reading of modern Indian history may be the panacea to massive inequalities, degenerating polity, regional, religious and casteist divisions and an absence of rapid growth.

Secondly, in present times, the destinies of the individual and of the nation-state are increasingly and inevitably intertwined. As in other developing countries, the dual responsibilities of maintaining order and promoting development have led to a highly interventionist role for the state in India. Thus, establishing a separation between the public and private spheres becomes difficult. Hence, the role of the individual in public life assumes greater significance. The Indian Constitution names the people as the source of all power. But, the concentration of power in the hands of the ruling elite, rising levels of political mobilization and the vast gap between the commitments and the capabilities of the state, lead to conflict between state sovereignty and popular sovereignty. A truly democratic order can emerge only when power conflicts are worked out with the active intervention of the masses and not through social engineering from above. An analysis of the interface between citizens and public institutions as also of the role of civil society, highlights factors responsible for the poor performance of the state machinery and the areas in which citizens and governments can collaborate to bridge the gap

between the formal theory and actual practice of democracy.

Finally, despite much scepticism, the role of literature in national life must be emphasized. The Indian novel in English has always been a faithful mirror of changing individual and national lives and sensibilities. The dilemma of the contemporary writer is captured poignantly by author and activist Arundhati Roy who writes, "Isn't it true...that there are times in the life of a people or a nation when the political climate demands that we – even the most sophisticated of us – overtly take sides?...I believe that in the coming years, intellectuals and artists will be called upon to take sides, and this time, unlike the struggle for Independence, we won't have the luxury of fighting a 'colonising enemy'. We'll be fighting ourselves. We will be forced to ask ourselves some very uncomfortable questions about our values and traditions, our vision for the future, our responsibilities as citizens, the legitimacy of our 'democratic institutions', the role of the state, the police, the army, the judiciary and the intellectual community" (Roy 197-198). Again, to quote Justice Markandey Katju, "Today India thirsts for good literature...Art and literature must serve the people. Writers and artists must have genuine sympathy for the people and depict their sufferings...they must inspire people to struggle for a better life...to create a better world, free of injustice. Only then will people respect them" (Katju, *The Hindu* 11). The novels selected for this study, which critique the individual and the nation in tandem can offer a vital roadmap for the future, especially in these troubled times.

Historian Sunil Khilnani writes, "...the history of independent India appears as the third moment in the great democratic experiment launched at the end of the eighteenth century by the American and French revolutions....The Indian experiment is still in its early stages, and its outcome may well turn out to be the most significant of them all....India's experience reveals the ordinariness of democracy – untidy, massively complex, unsatisfying but vital to the sense of a human life today" (Khilnani 4,8-9,207). Therefore, it becomes crucial to understand the causes of the swings in India's fortunes, the simultaneous adulation and condemnation her democracy attracts and explore why she has failed to fully realize her potential.

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CHAPTER II

FROM PARTITION AND INDEPENDENCE TO THE EMERGENCY (1947-1975)

(GURCHARAN DAS' *A FINE FAMILY* AND ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*)

There is no easy walk-over to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of shadow again and again before we reach the mountain top of our desire.
—Jawaharlal Nehru

2.1. 1947-1975: A Shared History

After more than two centuries of British rule, India won independence on 15 August 1947. A nation watched in pride and joy, as the Indian tricolour replaced the British Union Jack. However, the journey after independence would prove to be as difficult if not more, than the journey to independence. The citizen of new India had to first overcome the trauma of the Partition of India (into India and Pakistan), and the accompanying communal carnage. The 1950s and 1960s saw a vibrant nation-building enterprise based on Gandhian ideals under Prime Minister Nehru. However, if the wars with Pakistan and China augmented patriotism, the decaying polity, secessionism, and debacle in the Indo-China war led to disillusionment. The late sixties and early seventies brought new hopes, with anti-poverty campaigns and the victory in the Bangladesh war under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. By the mid-seventies, the political rot culminated in the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi's government. One of the darkest periods in Indian history, it saw thousands being jailed, tortured and killed for opposing the authoritarian government. Nevertheless, despite the dangers threatening the fledgling nation-state, citizen and government collaborated with each other and Indian democracy stood the test of time.

Independence and Partition on one hand, and the Emergency on the other, demarcate the period between 1947 and 1975 in Indian national history. These seminal years have been reflected by several Indian English novelists - Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, K.A.Abbas, Kamala Markandaya, Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Chaman Nahal, Nayantara Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Amitav Ghosh. In this context, Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990), and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996) stand out as significant chronicles of the Partition and the Emergency respectively, while also covering the period immediately before, after and between these two events.

Gurcharan Das is among those influenced by the old masters of the Indian English novel, while Rohinton Mistry belongs to the second generation writing in the wake of noted novelist Salman Rushdie's postmodern experiments (Naik and Narayan 34). Both Das and Mistry balance social realism with an inward journey into the human psyche. The central premise of Das' *A Fine Family* is the role of the refugees and their descendants. It depicts through three generations of a family which migrates from Pakistan to India during the 1947 Partition, the reciprocal influence of the middle-class family and the nation-state. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* dwells upon the impact of the 1975 Emergency on the poorest and weakest citizens. K.C Belliappa calls it "a wonderfully successful account of the life of the country between 1945 and 1984 ... an accomplishment quite unusual in Indian fiction in English" (Belliappa, "Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*: A Prototypical Realistic Novel" 211).

Together, *A Fine Family* and *A Fine Balance* offer a genuine account of the fine interplay of the personal and the national, in a crucial period of India's history. Written in the 1990s, they synthesize the conventional (social realist or existentialist) and post-modernist eras in Indian English fiction. As Jasbir Jain observes, the nineties novels are full of family sagas merging the personal and political. Placing the individual within generational kinship patterns, they filter national history through the marginalised (Jain 13-15). Thus India becomes a Refugee's India in Das' narrative and a Dalit or Parsi India in Mistry's narrative.

2.2. Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990)

Gurcharan Das was born in 1943 in Lyallpur (Pakistan), in an educated middle class family which crossed over to India after the Partition. A Harvard graduate and former CEO of Procter and Gamble India, he is a noted thinker, political commentator, columnist and management guru.

His philosophy blends liberalism and economic reforms, entrepreneurship and spirituality. He confesses that he abandoned an attempt to join politics for no party needed a man focused on national reforms (Das, *The Elephant Paradigm* 310-311).

His writings include prize-winning plays - *Larins Sahib* (1970), *Mira* (1971) and *9 Jakhoo Hill* (1973) published as *Three English Plays* (2001), a novel - *A Fine Family* (1990), and acclaimed non-fiction - *India Unbound* (2000), *The Elephant Paradigm* (2002), *The Difficulty of Being Good* (2009) and *India Grows At Night* (2012). Das' historical play *Larins Sahib* is a noteworthy contribution to modern Indian English drama. His optimistic prose envisages India's emergence as an economic power. In *India Unbound* Das hails the economically resurgent India of the 1990s, while in *The Elephant Paradigm* he depicts ancient India re-awakening to power in the new millennium. In *The Difficulty of Being Good* he re-interprets the *Mahabharata*, advocating *dharma* or selfless duty, while in *India Grows At Night* he calls for a strong state that is tough on corruption and actively ensures social justice. Amartya Sen praises Das for his deft interweaving of memoir with history (Das, *The Elephant Paradigm* blurb). Shashi Tharoor lauds his 'engaging', 'layman-friendly' style, embellished by personal anecdotes (Das, *India Unbound* praise for the book).

Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* is the story of India's urban middle class from 1942 to 1983, of the struggle of a fine family and a great nation to build a new future in difficult circumstances. It is divided into three parts, set in Lyallpur, Simla and Bombay. The major national epochs covered in *A Fine Family* are – the Quit India movement of 1942, Independence and Partition of 1947- 48, the Nehruvian era and the Indo-China war of 1962, the Indira Gandhi regime and the Emergency of 1975.

In this novel of power and artistry, the human existential drama is used to present an objective view of the Indian nation. In a time of extraordinary transformation, the ordinary citizen struggles to overcome the ruthless British coloniser, the trauma of Partition and finally the disillusionment caused by the native ruling class. A reading of Das' autobiographical *India Unbound* reveals that *A Fine Family* mirrors three generations of his own family. As he puts it, "I can measure the passages of my life by the nation's milestones. When I was born, we were fighting to get the British out of India...During my school days in the 1950s, Nehru set about building a proud new nation...When I went to work in the sixties I discovered that we had become economically enslaved... By the time I got married and we had children, Indira Gandhi was creating dynastic rule ...When she declared the Emergency in the mid-seventies...paradise was lost...Just before I took early retirement in the early nineties, Narasimha

Rao delivered us our economic freedom. It doesn't matter who will be ruling India when I die, because democracy has got entrenched..." (Das, *India Unbound* 3).

Three Generations of Freedom

A Fine Family chronicles an upper middle class Hindu Punjabi Khatri family. It opens with a blissful picture of Lala Dewan Chand Varma alias Bauji, the eminent lawyer and astute, charismatic patriarch of Lyallpur, and his quintessential Punjabi joint family. Bauji blends orthodoxy and progressiveness, an Indian heart and an Anglicised mind. He represents middle-class consciousness with his faith in the Arya Samaj, his love for Gokhale's moderate politics, and his fight against British racism. The 1942 Quit India movement led by Gandhi and the communal antagonisms intensified by Jinnah, divide Bauji's family politically and make him anxious about the ability of Indians to rule themselves. He asks,

> '...Do you think *we* are ready for freedom?' (p.12, 13).

Though he wants the British to leave, he dreads a divided nation when the colonial structure crumbles. He senses the deep malaise of organized religion in politics that is carrying the Punjab to its doom, to be sacrificed at the altar of freedom. He is shocked when his favourite nephew Karan forsakes a bright future to get arrested in the Quit India movement.

The monster of communalism scars every heart and Bauji's secular mind is deeply shaken:

> 'When was the lunacy going to stop? Why didn't the British take a firmer position on 'one India'?'(p.20)

Bauji blames Gandhi's street politics and fears Jinnah's vicious politics. His romance with the intelligent Muslim beauty Anees, reflects his desire to reconcile the Hindu and Muslim communities. At the marriage of his daughter Tara, the grief of *kanyadaan* is intensified by the brutal communal killings in the neighbourhood. The sight of the corpses of the young haunts Bauji. By July 1947, he is a dazed, defeated soul, locked in an unsuccessful battle to escape the reality of Partition and Radcliffe's devastatingly careless dividing lines. The loss of Lyallpur to Pakistan is the ultimate blow. Bauji rages at irrational leaders ordering him to suddenly relinquish his native soil, wealth, and ties of generations to march to an alien land:

> " 'I spit on all of you- Mountbatten, Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah. If this is the price of freedom, I don't want it.... Mountbatten dreams of glory...of giving birth to two nations...Gandhi and Nehru dream of winning freedom from the most powerful empire on the earth...by peaceful means. Jinnah dreams of being the father...of Pakistan.' He wished there were more practical men in politics. They would think like him, and look to the needs of ordinary people.... Had it been...an accident of nature Bauji would have found it easier to accept it... It was the insanity of men acting in the name of higher principles which he found hard to stomach." (p.95,96)

Independence comes as a fatal blow to Bauji's family. Bone-chilling and heart-rending scenes follow, in the massacres of millions of Hindus and Muslims, within hours, on either side of the India-Pakistan border. In a scene taken straight out of the French Revolution, Bauji drives a rickety tonga through a burning town filled with cheering, murderous mobs to take his family to safety. Their long journey from Lyallpur to the Wagah border, along with thousands of fleeing Hindus is a hellish nightmare. Men, women, elderly and children are repeatedly raped and butchered by Jinnah's fanatic mobs:

> "...the summer of 1947 was one of the hottest in people's memory...The standing crops of maize were parched...The cattle bellowed from hunger... On the road, where millions were marching, there was no relief...Those who survived filed past, column after column, miles and miles of tramping feet...They fought for water, and drank every drop, till nothing but mud was left. But often what greeted them in the villages was a faint hot smoke that bore the smell of burnt bodies...They had to choose, whether to die of thirst or from the Muslim's sword." (p.109, 110).

The same fate befalls Muslims fleeing India, at the hands of the Sikh fanatics. Bauji is shot and his youngest daughter is killed.

Bauji ironically calls the Partition an essential sacrificial purgation and squarely blames Viceroy Mountbatten's haste:

> '...If Mountbatten had not been blinded by a sense of his own destiny as the liberator of one-fifth of the human race, the bloodshed could have been avoided. People needed time to pack their bags and leave. Even Radcliffe needed more time. He had to rush and so a town was cut off from its river, a village from its fields, a factory from its raw materials...'(p.117)

Bauji is sure of only one thing- better to be a coward, than to kill in the name of any martial religion. This liberal humanist, after turning penniless refugee overnight, bravely salvages his life and contributes to nation-

building. He is supported by the fortitude of his pious and compassionate wife, Bhabo. This resilience in overcoming unsparing fate and selfish politics is manifested by almost every member of Bauji's family.

Like Bauji, all the other characters are inevitably drawn into the national vortex. Bauji's favourite daughter Tara - beautiful, intelligent, educated and self-willed, symbolizes the feminine renaissance. Her intolerance for injustice makes her dream of a free India. The Gandhian movement fascinates her but also creates worries about the future of Punjab. The Partition makes Tara sadder and wiser, filled with helpless anger. She re-locates with her husband and son to Simla. Her life in new India is both an escape and a struggle, as a refugee coming to terms with an arranged marriage, after her cousin and love Karan is snatched away by the freedom struggle. Karan's entire life is changed as he jumps into the fray of Gandhian politics, estranging his doting uncle Bauji and Tara. Embodying the sacrifice of the Indian youth, he is like young Wordsworth in the French Revolution. His subsequent cynicism as part of the post-independence ruling elite, is symbolic of national decay. Chachi, the old grand-aunt, who lives only to see India free, is ironically killed in the Partition riots. Tara's husband, the inconspicuous, idealistic government officer Seva Ram, embodies a unique moral approach, drawing on his inner strength during the crisis. Seva Ram's Guru, a model of austerity and service is a magnetic figure, an oasis for tormented citizens. The spirituality of this hermit and his disciple Seva Ram is a guiding light amid the turmoil. Bauji meeting the Guru and Tara marrying Seva Ram, signifies the synthesis of materialism and spirituality, crafting a new resilient India. The elegant feminist Anees Hussain, exemplifies the Muslim community exploited by the colonizer and Jinnah's two-nation theory. Like Hamid, the District Collector of Lyallpur, she is among those exemplary Muslims who save numerous Hindus like Bauji's family. Gurcharan Das uses these different individuals to define varied approaches to India's changing destiny at a critical juncture in her history.

If the first part of the novel is about the birth-pangs of a new democracy, part two (depicting the second generation of Bauji's family), delineates the rise of the citizen after destiny has snatched away almost everything, except an indomitable spirit. The citizen now faces a series of adventures in free India. The 1950s and 1960s are narrated largely from the perspective of the usually subaltern female citizen embodied in Tara, heir of her father's resilience. As the wife of Seva Ram, an ascetic bureaucrat, she has to give up her desire for luxury and fame. She is bitter about the price her family has to pay for freedom. In a scene reminiscent of the Biblical image of the exiled Israelites weeping by the Babylon, Tara

with her four year old son Arjun, cries by the river Sutlej on the evening of 14 August, 1947. A Partition-refugee like fourteen million others, she has to overcome her own fear, grief and hatred for the Muslims who kill her younger sister. In January 1948, Tara breaks down upon hearing of Gandhi's assassination. As she and her husband listen to Prime Minister Nehru's eulogy, they realise that, if India is to survive, every citizen must cherish the sacred bond with the Mahatma, the apostle of truth and non-violence.

Tara, unlike Seva Ram, cannot take refuge in spirituality and seeks solace in the glorious future of India. In Tara, the personal and the national merge into one, for her middle class romantic dreams are, as Das puts it,

> "...also the dreams of the new nation that was still being led by the dreamer Nehru....She believed in Nehru's hopes of democracy, socialism and secularism. She had long forgiven him for his miscalculation of the Partition. Even though she thought he was an idealist, she liked his dreams. Besides she trusted Nehru because he had proven himself by liberating the Hindu woman. As far as she was concerned the Hindu Code Bill was the most important legislation enacted in the Indian parliament in the 50s." (p.184)

Despite hardships and anger at the corruption in public life, Tara dares to dream of a great nation where her son would grow up to be a worthy citizen. Later, she doubts the effectiveness of Nehru's socialism in the Indian bureaucratic jungle. Her insistence on providing English education and knowledge of contemporary politics to her son represents the national consciousness of the middle-class.

Seva Ram, grounded in solid middle class virtues and devotion to duty, becomes a hero for Tara as he displays equanimity, steely resilience and wisdom to guide his family during those turbulent days. He sees the catastrophe of Partition as an enactment of divine justice in an imperfect world. His guru, Sant Singh, translates spirituality into action, providing shelter and solace to thousands of refugees in his ashram. The Guru sees the world as temporary and the ultimate objective of the soul as merging with the infinite through selfless action.

Tara and Seva Ram's son Arjun is the sole hope of Bauji's family. While the Guru sees him as a spiritual seeker, Bauji sees his beloved grandson as a worldly conqueror. Like India, Arjun at his birth is claimed by two forces and wisely amalgamates the two. He represents the first generation after independence- confident, rooted in the Indian soil yet open to new ideas, embodying the best in the previous generations. His

humiliating encounter with the corrupt plutocracy, at a young age, fires his latent desire to create his own destiny.

In 1955, Bauji, now settled in Hoshiarpur, visits Tara in Simla. A famous refugee lawyer, he is elected President of the Hoshiarpur Municipal Committee. His democratic, visionary leadership that is sensitive to human suffering, contrasts with the selfish ruling class. That a refugee should partake of local self-government, speaks well of Indian democracy in the early 1950s. Bauji calls his success, the story of the courage of every refugee:

> "...a man really doesn't know his own strength until he has met with adversity." (p.168)

But, the Hindu Code Bill guaranteeing equal property rights to women, brings into conflict Tara's reformatory zeal and Bauji's conservatism.

On his second visit to Simla during the Indo-China conflict of 1962, Bauji is exasperated by the empty rhetoric of politicians, the price of democracy. Soon, the stage is set for an encounter between the educated middle class and the shallow ruling elite. While Partition impoverishes Bauji, it brings wealth and political clout to his old friends - the Mehtas from Lyallpur, whose property is on the Indian side of the border. The party at Mehta house displays the growing disparity in India. Bauji finds that national ideals have changed –

> "He was amused with the thought that when it came to power it was remarkable how easily Indians had slipped into British shoes... They must be secretly happy...that Gandhi was not around to spoil things..." (p.200)

Disgusted by the mass idolization of the privileged, Bauji loses his temper at the hypocritical politicians. He lambasts the dreamy socialism of Nehru's government in front of a Cabinet Minister and calls for immediate negotiation with China over the disputed territory:

> '...First, you lead us up the garden path of Indo-Chinese friendship, forgetting our own self-interest, and now you talk about "throwing the Chinese out"... Dreamers are dangerous, especially, if they rule nations. I was thinking of...Mr. Nehru...'(p.201)

If Bauji finds any pleasant company, it is with refugees from old Punjab whose enterprise and guts contrast with the frivolity of the upper class,

> "...for they had despised death when life was more terrible than dying, and they had to dared to live." (p.199)

However, Bauji's innocent grandson Arjun falls for Priti, the beautiful daughter of the Mehtas. Priti uses him to get close to Tara's cousin Karan, who elopes with her. Coinciding with this treachery is another - the Chinese aggression. Bauji helps Arjun to rise above his depression to a deeper vision of life. Priti, intelligent and striking, belongs to a spoilt westernized generation that values only wealth. Karan, the once patriotic freedom-fighter-turned-socialite, turns dangerously cynical and materialistic, symbolising the temptations that lead the nation astray. Eventually, both Tara and Priti regret their initial attraction to him.

If Bauji is the central figure of part one of the novel, part two focuses on his daughter Tara, and part three belongs to his grandson Arjun's exploits in Bombay - the ultimate symbol of modern India. Against the wishes of his parents, Arjun (modelled on the novelist himself) struggles to make his fortune as an entrepreneur in Bombay of the sixties, instead of choosing a secure bureaucratic career. The impossible, bustling metropolis and the romance of its commercial world become a part of Arjun's soul. His innovation and labour take his firm to great heights. His brave, ingenious vision for industry, in a socialist, bureaucratic state, infuses life into a jaded system. A passionate man, who believes in business for the larger common good, he charts his own course. Life comes full circle when he meets Priti Mehta again. Made wiser and gentler by the bitter experiences of bankruptcy and Karan's betrayal, Priti comes to value the Indian ethos in Arjun, and embarks on a spiritual quest for self-realisation. If Arjun is the hero of new India, Priti is his true soul- mate.

Visiting his grandson Arjun in Bombay in 1972, Bauji looks at rising India with hope and anxiety. Old and dying, he is glad to have seen freedom and democracy in his motherland-

> "Bauji himself belonged to the first generation in his family to acquire a Western education in the early years of this century, and he had become a lawyer...Seva Ram, who had been part of the second generation, which had gone in for technical training...had become an engineer ...Now here was Arjun, who represented the third generation, which aspired to manage private enterprise in a scientific manner in a free country. It was new and it was good... Despite great social changes that had taken place during his lifetime, he could still detect the unbroken and enduring thread that linked one generation to the next." (p.250, 251).

With his indomitable spirit, Bauji takes death as another adventure. When Anees Hussain visits him from Pakistan, they regret the Partition and the growth of communalism. Anees, who laments the lack of freedom in Pakistan, remarks-

> 'The mistake we made in the 1940s Bauji, was to believe that just because we were Muslims we belonged to a separate nation. India didn't have to be divided in 1947. And we cheaply sold away the birthright of the Indian Muslim.'(p.285)

The friendship of Bauji and Anees reflects the subconscious desire for reunion between the peoples of India and Pakistan. Bauji passes away peacefully, having lived life to the fullest. His final moments in the embrace of nature are described with incredible grace.

Arjun's father Seva Ram gives up his high-profile government job as Chief Engineer. He helps his Guru to build dams and hospitals, introduce innovative farming and reclaim wastelands for the poorest. Arjun's mother Tara seeks solace in Arjun's achievements. Despite her objections, Arjun marries Priti. Their blissful life is disturbed by the Emergency:

> "Their worst fears were realized. On 26 June 1975 the Prime Minister declared an Emergency. Before dawn police parties acting under her orders woke up political opponents and locked them up. In those thirty-six hours Arjun felt that India had changed from a democracy to a dictatorship. Arjun, Tara and Priti were all numb with shock." (p.305, 306)

Encouraged by powerful Congress politicians, trade unionists place unjust demands before Arjun's firm. In the larger public interest, Arjun puts up a legal fight and displays extraordinary moral courage. He is assaulted and arrested under the draconian Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) on the charge of insulting Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi's son, Sanjay Gandhi. Bauji's family again witnesses a painful chapter in India's history- the fight for liberty and justice against a repressive state. The stand-off between citizen and government culminates in the long months that innocent Arjun spends in Gaya Central jail, without access to trial, enduring mental and physical torture- stripping, beatings and maddening isolation. Under the MISA laws, he has no human rights. But he, like the ordinary Indian, wins by spiritual strength. After a brave, futile battle for Arjun's release, his wife Priti takes refuge in the Guru's ashram, where a daughter is born to her. The Guru and Seva Ram guide Priti to her spiritual destiny. After fifteen months in prison, Arjun is released. The withdrawal of the Emergency proves the supremacy of the freedom-loving masses. Premier Mrs. Gandhi buckles under pressure, and declares elections in which she is thoroughly defeated. The Constitution which vests supreme power with the people is vindicated –

> "Even a tyrant, Arjun had thought with amusement, needs the people's consent." (p.325)

Six years later, at the start of the eighties, when people vote out the ineffective Janata party government, and Mrs. Gandhi is back in power, the author depicts Arjun on his fortieth birthday. He is a hero in the commercial world, respected by civil society and government.

The battle with government forces changes both Arjun and his wife Priti. Arjun realises the value of a normal life and embraces it. Priti is inspired to seek the infinite while Arjun considers religion to be an evasion of reality. Priti leaves for the Guru's ashram in the north. A broken-hearted Arjun stays back, actively engaged in uplifting the marginalised through business activities. He symbolises the higher aspirations of the Indian citizen. As he puts it:

> "...By offering dreams of god, religions have been distracting people for a thousand years from...wrong-doings. ...The only thing that matters...is to have compassion for human suffering... To tolerate an unjust social structure...is to condemn millions to misery... Gandhi had said it best, 'If god were to appear in India he would have to take the form of a loaf of bread.' Service to man was more important than devotion to god! The two were not necessarily incompatible, but even Mother Teresa had made her choice, as had Gandhi....." (p.336-346)

Arjun's philanthropic projects directly uplift thousands of tribals. The novelist observes,

> "Arjun felt so enthusiastic with his discovery about the social benefits of the market economy that he no longer felt the need to be defensive..." (p.343)

This is the vision of Gurcharan Das, the management guru, about the vital need to encourage private enterprise in a socialist state-driven economy. The novel ends with Arjun happily reunited with his parents, wife and daughters. He is conscious that though Indian democracy is vibrant, eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. He is confident that his 'fine family' will survive all onslaughts, for its soul is in the right place.

Quit India, Free India, India Divided

In the first part of *A Fine Family*, Gurcharan Das portrays the British Raj in Punjab with its well-oiled administrative machinery emphasizing infrastructure and irrigation. There is an impartial estimate of the positives

and negatives of British rule. Then there are the Northern towns of the 1940s – conservative elders, joint families, progressive youth, ritualistic religion, snobbish British ladies, and Indians vying for the favour of the whites. The politically conscious middle-class synthesizing east and west, fears the uncertainties in a free India. It sees the British state as a provider of livelihood and keeper of law and order. Those in government service have to choose between loyalty to the master or to the nation.

The Gandhian revolution that starts from the ranks of the downtrodden, brings the state and citizen into direct conflict, and results in ideological and religious polarisation. At the peak of the Second World War, the British see their empire tottering, pounded at home by Nazis and in India by freedom-fighters. They see the Quit India campaign as treachery. With Gandhi's call of 'do or die' translated into violent action by impassioned youth, and the Congress leaders imprisoned, Jinnah snatches the initiative. Gandhi and Churchill remain equally stubborn even as Japanese invasion is imminent. There are passionate debates on Jinnah's two-nation theory between Hindus and Muslims who had so far lived in amity. The novelist sensitively depicts the gloom and fear of the masses. He incorporates into mainstream history, the hitherto invisible middle class, disillusioned by power-hungry Britishers, impractical native leaders, religious fundamentalists and impressionable masses.

Gurcharan Das accentuates the grief of unjustly sacrificed Punjab, reduced to a land of death with souls Partitioned a million times. History is re-lived through the journalistic diaries of a dedicated physician, Dr. Des Raj, who tends to the wounded in horrifying refugee camps:

> 'I had no medicines, nor instruments... I had to perform major operations with second hand razor blades...I took out bullets from tens of wounds...I treated a goldsmith's wife whose breasts had been lopped off,... I also treated a large number of men with circumcision wounds... delivered a number of babies, which came prematurely...many cases became septic.' (p.107)

This impartial, sensitive eye-witness speaks of hastily circumcised infants, famine and drought, wells filled with corpses and fathers killing daughters to save their honour. As the two hundred year old edifice of Empire crumbles, a maelstrom engulfs the nation:

> 'An estimated twenty million Hindus moved out of West Punjab and East Bengal and eighteen million Muslims moved into Pakistan... over half-a-million people lost their lives; there were twenty-two thousand reported cases of rape and kidnapping of women; two-hundred-and-twenty-thousand people were declared missing.'(p.116)

From the postcolonial perspective, Gurcharan Das raises several complex issues - Anglicisation of Indians, their self-deprecating attitudes and the peculiar post-colonial dilemma. Bauji struggles to balance the psychological scars of racism with faith in British justice, English language with native dressing. A Manchester towel reminds him that Indians, used to being ruled by alien races, would have to re-learn the art of self-rule. His nephew Karan is extremely sensitive to racism. His son is swept away by European fashions, while his daughter Tara's western education leads to painful debates over her arranged marriage. His son-in-law Seva Ram's career affords glimpses of the arrogance and luxurious life of the white sahibs. Bauji burdened with the inescapable colonial legacy, is a 'mimic man' who both contradicts and reinforces colonial authority. During Partition, he becomes the 'exile', emblematic of the violent re-shaping of human identities by colonialism, in this case, the single largest population shift in history.

For the Britishers in Lyallpur's Civil Lines and Company Bagh, the attempt to recreate Britain in India fails. Neither the British nor the Indians feel at home. While the Englishman shrinks back from his own mirror image seen in the western-educated Indian, the Englishwoman tries her best to maintain the racial barriers. The retired Indophile British judge, at Tara's wedding, explains the communal disharmony as an outcome of the use of religion by the Indian renaissance to counter colonial culture. He also speaks of the plight of the ordinary British citizens, tired of the Indian empire, of the confusing tactics of Churchill and the Nazi raids. Thus, Das is able to empathize with both colonized and colonizer.

The second part of the novel records the first generation after independence gaining maturity. Gurcharan Das remembers independence from the perspective of the refugees, as they listen at midnight to Nehru's 'tryst with destiny speech' and to the new national anthem. The word 'Punjab' brings tears to their eyes. A freedom they cannot enjoy fully is the biggest irony. Yet, the significance of India's hard-won, long-desired liberty is not lost on them.

The enthusiastic nation invests a lot of hope in the ambitious dreams and industrial plans of Nehru. The success and political participation of the refugees, the government efforts to emancipate women, the healthy national debate on the Hindu Code Bill and its extensive media coverage - all suggest a vibrant democracy. Yet, both Tara and Bauji decry the corrupt colonial attitudes of native rulers and bureaucrats. Seva Ram's career proves that success in public life grows in inverse proportion to integrity. Affluent lifestyles continue in a nation struggling with hunger and war. While high society discusses the China war in glittering ball-

rooms, the man on the street and the ill-equipped soldiers remain insecure. There is both public anger against the Chinese and disappointment with regard to the Indian political class.

Das supports decentralisation and end of red-tapism. His protagonists are seldom passive sufferers; they analyse and question government decisions. For instance, Tara rants against unworthy politicians:

> '...All those good-for-nothings who went to jail in the '40s became ministers. And the rascals put on such airs when they rode in government rickshaws'. (p.182)

From the postcolonial perspective, part two of the novel highlights the continuing impact of colonialism even in free India. Simla, frozen in time, stands as a reminder of colonial life and architecture. The unhealthy legacy of the Raj flourishes in the Amateur Dramatic Club and the Mehta House. In Hoshiarpur, Bauji notices that Indian politicians have managed to retain only the undesirable aspects of British rule.

In the last part of the novel, drawing upon his own experiences, Das uses the image of the city of Bombay to symbolize the spirit of a new India. Arjun represents the struggle of the entrepreneurs who built up the Indian economy. Bombay stands for the determination of Indians to succeed despite all odds. Here, a truly cosmopolitan India emerges, where no religion or caste is greater than progress, where humanism rules and no custom is sacrosanct.

The novelist portrays a nation in transition- the massive churning between orthodoxy and modernity, prosperity and poverty. The agricultural Green Revolution and industrial progress empower farmers and the middle class. But, in Arjun's visit to the Guru's ashram, Das contrasts government inefficiency with civil society initiative. When Tara wonders about the inaction of Delhi even when solutions to national problems are known, Arjun explains:

> 'Because doing the right thing goes against the interest of the rulers. When you ask them, both the politicians and the bureaucrats come up with reasonable and convincing answers... We Indians are tender-minded as a nation. Whenever we are faced with a tough choice, we have a tender excuse for not taking it.'(p.293)

Das sketches the Emergency of 1975-77 through the reactions of commoners. From initial acceptance, people go into disbelief and revolt as the intrusive government tortures and kills in the name of order. The police excesses and Nazi-like prisons are a shameful blot on Indian history. Das castigates the ruling class that strikes at its own foundations,

by cutting off the umbilical cord of fundamental rights which connects the citizen to the Constitution. For instance, there is this conversation between Tara and her son:

> 'I sometimes wonder', Tara told Arjun, 'if our democracy isn't just a matter of the blind leading the blind.' 'The taste of democracy becomes bitter, mother, when the fullness of democracy is denied; when the weak do not have the same opportunity as the strong.' (p.325)

The freedom-loving citizen finally wins but emerges deeply scarred, more enlightened and mature, realising that excessive government power can stifle liberty. As Arjun muses,

> "...democracy...had taken root on the Indian soil... but the ease with which liberty was snuffed out ... sent a shiver down his spine, and made him appreciate the delicate jewel that democracy was." (p.347)

From the postcolonial perspective, part three of the novel records how the colonial impact continues three decades after independence. Arjun and Priti are reminded about the pricelessness of freedom, when they discover the photograph of a sad Bauji taken in 1919- when he was racially abused under the Rowlatt Act. In Bombay of the seventies, Anglicised Indians lose their clout amid talented and vibrant youth. Yet the colonial legacy survives through some mimic men. Arjun exemplifies how the Indian mind has resolved the post-colonial dilemma by embracing both East and West. His commercial success explodes the coloniser's myth that Indians could succeed only in the religious domain.

Poignant Portraits: Punjab, Simla, Bombay

In part one of *A Fine Family*, the novelist recreates history interestingly at both micro and macro levels. Against the vast national canvas is played out the drama of the strengths and weaknesses of his characters. He has a gift for describing the changing seasons, the rich, vibrant culture and laidback lifestyle in the Punjabi heartland. There is also the portrait of Bauji as a father, the tragic passion of Bauji and Anees, the unrequited love of Tara. Das harnesses powerful images from Nature, to poignantly depict men and women trying to squeeze happiness out of a few moments, before facing an uncertain future. He analyses the psychopathology of communal violence and the battered psyche of its victims, as in Bauji's touching dialogue with innocent young Muslim boys indoctrinated to kill him. Despite the unthinkable inhumanity of man to man, the Partition also shows the triumph of human values and courage.

Das invents a new vocabulary to capture the indescribable catastrophe in all its dimensions. He polishes his two inches of ivory so well, that the depiction of an ordinary family, in those dramatic times, is enough to keep the reader engaged.

In part two, Gurcharan Das empathises deeply with the suffering of Partition-refugees - the hidden agony of Tara, the massacre of Muslims at Jalandhar station, or the living death of the old Sikh who has seen his entire family being butchered. He re-creates the colonial magic of Simla while sympathising with the marginalised. The Simla Dusshera exemplifies the union of myriad cultures in India. The delightfully restrained romance of Tara and Seva Ram united by the shared trauma of Partition, and the depiction of Arjun's childhood and first love, in pristine Simla, are masterpieces. Conflicting human passions are captured well - Bauji grieving for India, Arjun's hopeless longing for Priti. The lustful passion of Priti and Karan signifying empty, limitless materialism and its impact on Arjun is sensitively portrayed.

The last section of the novel is set in Bombay. Few writers can evoke Bombay, an amalgam of the whole of India, so realistically. Das creates poetry out of the city especially in the romantic scenes involving Priti and Arjun. He never loses sight of the human emotional trauma in his re-telling of the Emergency. Through the tensions between Arjun and Priti, Das presents a beautiful clash and reconciliation of two philosophies of life - Arjun's worldly action and Priti's renunciation.

Critical Review

To sum up, the first part of the novel offers an impartial account of the personal and the national vis-a-vis contemporary historical issues. Das' view of the British Raj is backed by historian Bipan Chandra: "The character of the colonial state was quite paradoxical. While it was basically...autocratic, it also featured...the rule of law and a relatively independent judiciary" (Chandra 21). While colonial rule led to drastic and often positive changes, their operation within the colonial framework led to economic plunder and social divisions. Secondly, Das' assessment of nationalist politics is perceptive. Like his protagonist Bauji, many Indians were opposed to Gandhi's outright rejection of the Cripps proposals, which they felt were a major advance in the British position and could have prevented the Partition (*Out of the Ruins of the West*...235-236). Bauji's fears about the timing of the 1942 movement when Japanese invasion was imminent, were also shared by many. Gandhi's passionate politics was exploited by Jinnah (Lapierre and Collins 43). Yet, Das

salutes the power of Gandhi's mass-based politics which struck at the heart of the British Empire.

Thirdly, Gurcharan Das rightly attributes the holocaust of Partition to the stubbornness of all players– Jinnah and his radicals, the British led by Mountbatten and Indian nationalists. His rendering of the unfathomable pathos of four hundred million Punjabis, suddenly ripped apart, matches the best accounts of the Partition. Punjab was the crown jewel, the granary of India, with five thousand years of peaceful co-existence of different faiths. The Punjabis hoped until the end that Partition would somehow be avoided. The Partition itself was done in a hurried, shoddy manner to quell violent politicians. Sir Cyril Radcliffe was chosen to head the Indo-Pakistani Boundary Commission because his total ignorance about India would guarantee impartiality. He lamented that he had to carve up lands, fields, roads and water-sources without having seen them, without equipment or statistics and knew that a bloodbath would follow (Lapierre and Collins, xxiii-xxv). In *Freedom at Midnight*, Lapierre and Collins write: "India's joyful Independence Day was indeed a day of horror for the Punjab. The predominant colour of the dawn of freedom breaking over its ancient vistas was no purple and gold but crimson" (Lapierre and Collins 419). Shashi Tharoor writes, "...August 15, 1947, was a birth that was also an abortion" (Tharoor 15).

By producing a poignant novel on the Partition of India, Gurcharan Das has continued a tradition in Indian English fiction. A graphic description of the horrors of Partition is found in - Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), B.Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* (1959), Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Bonophul's *Betwixt Dream And Reality* (1961), Balwant Singh Anand's *Cruel Interlude* (1961), Padmini Sengupta's *Red Hibiscus* (1962), Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Raj Gill's *The Rape* (1974), Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), H.S Gill's *Ashes and Petals* (1978), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1991). Other novels containing references to Partition include Manohar Malgonkar's *Distant Drum* (1960), Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House* (1961), Mulk Raj Anand's *Death of a Hero* (1964), Nina Sibal's *Yatra* (1987), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* (1992), Shiv K. Kumar's *River with Three Banks: the Partition of India: the Agony and the Ecstasy* (1999).

Like most conventional Partition novels, *A Fine Family* negotiates historical facts and fictional representation, individual lives and historical epochs. Das merges history with memoir, and his approach to the Partition as an event of his childhood, establishes the authority of the narrative. Chaman Nahal's *Azadi,* dealing with the migration of a Hindu joint family

from Pakistan to India in 1947, closely resembles *A Fine Family*. Both novels graphically describe the horrors befalling convoys of refugees on either side of the border. According to O.P.Mathur, *A Fine Family* traces how an ordinary family faces “the trauma of Partition with composure and balance” and “the lucid, fluid and lyrical style reinforces this attitude” (Mathur 10, 11). The novel stands out for its effortless balancing of situation and character and its upholding of humane values amid communal carnage. It believes that India still retains its pluralism and the Partition was a passing phase. The *Hindu* calls it "a worthy addition to the body of fiction that deals with the anguish and bitter memories of one of the most sorrowful disasters in recorded history” (qtd. in Das, *A Fine Family* blurb).

Part two of *A Fine Family* deals objectively with several issues pre-occupying both citizens and government in the fifties and sixties. The positive role of the Partition refugees is underlined. Leading political thinker Ranabir Samaddar sees the refugee as subaltern political subject who uses traumatic memories of displacement in varied ways to influence national politics (Samaddar xix, 189-193). Historians agree that Indian nationalism withstood the test of Partition and, the Nehru government in collaboration with civil society, set an exemplary record in quelling communalism, rehabilitating refugees and protecting minorities.

Secondly, Gurcharan Das probes the difficult historical question of whether Partition of India was the only option left, or, a solution offered by leaders impatient for power. When Tara hears of Home Minister Sardar Patel's argument that separating Pakistan was like removing a cancerous growth from India, she replies that such an operation leaves the whole body vulnerable. Lapierre and Collins opine that, blinded by their immediate motives, no one in authority foresaw the magnitude of Partition, except for Gandhi, whose fears were ignored (Lapierre and Collins *l*). Ramachandra Guha writes, “A slow, systematic process of British evacuation and transfer of populations with active troop deployment could have led to less violence" (Guha 33-34). Amartya Sen terms Partition an unbelievable yet carefully orchestrated carnage (Sen, *Identity and Violence* 170-172).

Das also analyses the massive nation-building project under the outstanding, inspiring vision of Nehru and his council of ministers. Those were years of slow, steady consolidation of - national unity and security, planned development, independent foreign policy, democratic procedures and structures, free judiciary and press, scientific advances, and a secular, welfare State. Nehru himself wrote in 1955: “There is the breath of the dawn...the beginning of a new era in the long and chequered history of

India" (Chandra 167). The novel also refers to the Hindu Code Bill, which was pushed through by Nehru and his Law Minister Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, risking stiff opposition from conservatives. This revolutionary legislation introduced monogamy and the right to divorce, raised the age of consent and marriage, and gave women the right to maintenance and to inherit family property.

Fourthly, the novel captures the beginnings of decay in the national polity through the dismay of the upright protagonists. Interestingly, in his messages to the Chief Ministers in 1948 and 1963, Nehru emphasized the need to root out corruption, inefficiency and red-tapism (Chandra 179). The debacle in the 1962 war with China is also traced to the imprudent leadership. It was "the sad tale of China's betrayal of its great friend", a blow to Indian pride, "leaving behind a heartbroken Nehru and a ...disoriented people" (Chandra 201, 209). As is evident in the novel, the precious idealism of Nehru's era tragically waned with the Chinese invasion which led to widespread cynicism about government policies and "marked a watershed in the people's perception of the working of Indian democracy" (Jalan 49).

Thus, Gurcharan Das assesses the Nehruvian era. Prime Minister Nehru's zeal for industries led to the neglect of agriculture and defence, sowing the seeds for the humiliation by the Chinese, economic disparity and later the Emergency. His poetic, idealistic and often indecisive temperament resulted in concentration of power with the corrupt state elites, while the blind adherence to socialism kept the private sector fettered. In 1953, Nirad C.Chaudhari described Nehru as "the legitimate successor to Gandhiji", the true leader of the people who linked India and the world (qtd. in Guha 151). But, by 1959, R.K.Laxman was saying, "At one time, he had a solution to every difficulty; today he faces a difficulty in every solution" (qtd. in Guha 281). Nevertheless, with his immense stature and extraordinary persona, Nehru, the democrat, socialist, humanist and visionary, remains the architect and anchor of modern India. Elsewhere, Gurcharan Das himself writes of Nehru, "Young people of my generation remained under his spell for decades" (Das, *India Unbound* 44).

The last part of the novel dwells on varied aspects linking individual and national lives. Over two decades after Partition, Bauji and his beloved Anees, herself a Pakistani, retrospect and regret the event, against the backdrop of autocracy in Pakistan and millions of Muslims enjoying democracy in India. Interestingly, Jinnah himself is said to have repented over his two-nation theory and advocated a secular Pakistan, towards his end (Singal 29-31).

Secondly, Gurcharan Das sings paeans to the Indian business class represented by Arjun. In all his non-fiction, Das hails Indian entrepreneurs who fought the centralized, socialist state and resurrected India economically. He lambasts the state for failing to develop human resources and denying economic liberty. Also, the contradictions of the sixties and seventies are a major concern in the novel. The encouragement to big industries by Nehru and the radical socialist strategies of Indira Gandhi slowly pushed India towards self-sufficiency. At the same time, the failure of governance in the mid-seventies attracts criticism from the novelist. Under Indira Gandhi, Indian electoral politics changed from mediated mobilisation to populism based on direct appeal to voters. The discontent about the poor performance of Mrs. Gandhi's government finally burst out in Jayaprakash Narayan's movement of 1974.

The fourth issue discussed is the infamous Emergency (1975-77) wherein the government usurped all fundamental rights, to quell political opponents and mass agitations. About Mrs. Gandhi's declaration of the Emergency, Das writes elsewhere, "...we were staggered by the insolence of her action" (Das, *India Unbound* 174). The tussle between the citizen and despotic government during the Emergency, according to Das, led to the firm entrenchment of democracy and the civil liberties movement in India. As a political commentator writes, "The years 1975-77 have been described as...the 'test of democracy'...the Indian people passed the test with distinction..." (Chandra 330). Meghnad Desai writes, "The simple idea that the poor preferred bread and circuses to freedom was exploded in India" (Desai 365). Thus, Das reiterates the role of civil society in sustaining Indian democracy. Even in his latest book *India Grows At Night* (2012), he speaks of India as a strong society with a weak state.

An Ode to the Indian Middle Class

In *A Fine Family*, Gurcharan Das balances historical veracity with artistic beauty and readability. His convincing characterisation and simple style, overflowing with the essence of India, captures the subtle magic of everyday life. To quote Amrita Shetty, "Gurcharan Das' particular strength seems to lie in his picturisation of everyday life ...He is a keen visualiser; a pointillist with words, painstakingly resurrecting an age and its prevailing temper...Das presents finely nuanced studies of most of his characters. They are all too human; deeply flawed, all of them seekers, beset with self-doubt and groping for answers to their dilemmas...flesh and blood characters to whom one can relate" (Shetty 30,31).

At a higher level, throughout the novel, Das, a student of philosophy, is obsessed with how ancient Indian philosophy resolves the existential crisis of the citizen. As he writes elsewhere, "To a lonely and banal world India offers a spiritual guide to the art of living" (Das, *The Elephant Paradigm* 355). V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar opines, "*A Fine Family* brings out a 'life-affirming' dimension of the Hindu value system...can be read as a fictional treatise on the *Purusarthas" (*Narendra Kumar 152). According to Malathi Mathur the entire novel is about gently accepting the bitter-sweet realities of existence. Against the exciting, dramatic and tragic backdrop of national events from 1947 to 1975 "the novel sensitively explores that greatest *Kurukshetra* of all-the human mind" (Mathur 119, 129).

Finally, Das allows each of his characters to formulate their own response to national destiny. If Bauji, Tara and Arjun find strength in a celebration of worldly life, Seva Ram and Priti seek spirituality. The figure of Bauji is a tribute to the refugee. His fall from prosperity results in acceptance of his own weaknesses, respect for human suffering, and the knowledge that continuity of life is most important. Tara and Priti symbolise the independent mind of the Indian woman. Tara realises that painful compromise and human existence are synonymous. Priti is a fine example of change from a cruel, vain beauty to a woman of substance. The way Arjun and Priti transform themselves, illustrates how the Indian citizen has not been led astray by national crises, but has rectified the faults of the state. As Arjun muses:

> "...There was little hope from the rulers.... Hope lay in the private individual, who was liberal and educated, reaching out to the silent and the suffering, and showing through his example how the liberal institutions could work." (p.346)

A Fine Family is Gurcharan Das' tribute to the ordinary middle class - the bedrock of the nation that suffers, gives, grows, the class of secular, educated Indians who shaped modern India. He foregrounds the rarely acknowledged role of the middle class in Indian history. He underlines the remarkable will to survive that is the result of a constant battle with adversity. As a critic puts it, "...It is the book of a believer; an optimist with faith in India, her people, her institutions and her future..." (Shetty 31). As a writer, Das has always lauded the Indian citizen who, according to him, has grown, not because of, but despite the government.

Das advocates a broad minded nationalism that will move beyond jingoism to ideal internationalism. The repeated attempts of Bauji's family to rise from the ashes are in many ways symbolic of India herself – a grand old nation learning to live all over again as a new state. It is the

culmination of Bauji's long cherished dream and the answer to his anxious query at the end of the Raj: "Are we ready to rule ourselves?" Bauji's fine family proves that after centuries of slavery, Indians are finally ready to rule themselves, to create their own destiny. The triumphs of the family and of the nation are synonymous with each other.

2.3. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996)

Born in 1952 in Mumbai, into a middle class Gujarati Parsi family, Rohinton Mistry has resided in Canada since 1975. He has authored a fine collection of short stories - *Tales From Firozsha Baag* (1987), three novels that were all shortlisted for the Booker Prize - *Such A Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002) as also, a short story *Scream* (2006). His fiction translated into over twenty-five languages, has won, among other awards, the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (in 1992 and 1996), and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (2012).

Like most Parsi novelists, Rohinton Mistry exhibits the community consciousness of the minority Parsees. His writing is marked by the trauma of rootlessness and alienation, "informed by the double vision acquired partially through his Canadian sojourn but also from his particular location in the Indian nation" (Roy and Pillai 13). Mistry problematizes conventional history by narrating the victimised and exposing unjust power structures. He has an ambivalent relationship with the India he presents to the world. His fiction highlights the importance of 'remembering' in national life. He says, 'My novels are not "researched"... Newspapers, magazines, chats with visitors from India - these are things I rely on....all these would be worthless without...memory and imagination' (qtd. in Bharucha 167). His novels like *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* are, according to Paromita Chakrabarti and Swati Ganguly, "powerful accounts of a ceaseless struggle for survival of the marginal, the dispossessed, and the poor, pitted against a ruthless, annihilating nation-state. They are scathing indictments of Indian politics of the 70's..." (Chakrabarti and Ganguly 55).

A Fine Balance, which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (1996), The Los Angeles Times Award (1996), The Giller Prize (1995), The Governor-General's Award (1991) and The Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Award (1996), is considered a significant landmark in recent Indian English fiction. It narrates the lives of four citizens during the internal Emergency declared in India by Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977. Dina Dalal from the 'city by the sea',

Ishvar Darji and Omprakash Darji from the 'village by the river' and Maneck Kolah from the 'mountains' are united and separated by national events. Attached to their lives, is an impressive array of minor characters. Each of them moulds his or her destiny in the battle with the government machinery. Rohinton Mistry's vast canvas extends from metropolises to villages, from the affluent to beggars. He combines the social realism of a Premchand or Mulk Raj Anand with the compassion of Dickens. The prologue from Balzac sets the tone for this sombre novel:

> '.....But rest assured: this tragedy is not fiction. All is true.'

As the juggernaut of the Emergency is set rolling, amid all the fragility of human existence, there is one message – only those who balance and rebuild survive. In a system that favours the ruthless, faith, hope and love become the refuge of the humane.

The City by the Sea, The Village and The Mountains

Forty-two year old Dina Dalal is the central figure of *A Fine Balance*, which opens in Bombay, the city by the sea, in 1975. This lonely Parsi widow earns her living by tailoring and employs two tailors, Ishvar and Om, to assist her. She takes in college-student Maneck Kolah as paying guest to supplement her meagre income. Proud, enterprising and free-spirited Dina thus draws together all the protagonists. Years of hard life in a run-down flat have not dulled her beauty or grit. Though cheated by life always, hers is the never-say-die attitude of Bombay:

> "Dina Dalal seldom indulged in looking back at her life with regret or bitterness...." (p.15)

As a child, Dina loses her beloved father, the reputed and selfless Dr. Shroff, who dies fighting cholera epidemics in the remote villages of British India. Dina's mother dies heartbroken. Harassed by her chauvinistic brother Nusswan, young Dina is denied higher education and reduced to a maid-servant in her own house. Her teenage years coincide with the freedom struggle. Even as the Partition riots rage, her defiance of her brother seems like the first stirrings of Indian feminism. In free India, her buoyant spirit explores the world outside. Rejecting 'suitable, upper-class' matches, she marries Rustom Dalal, a humble chemist with a heart of gold. After his untimely death, the ever-dignified Dina takes to tailoring for financial independence. When years of embroidering damage her eyesight, she hires tailors. Meanwhile, national unrest grows. In the

sixties, the radical political outfit Shiv Sena organizes regionalistic agitations in Bombay, targeting South Indians. A few years later, there is Jayaprakash Narayan's movement, protesting government policies. In such turbulent times, small entrepreneurs like Dina struggle to survive. The apathy of the administration is evident when her husband's mangled, rusted bicycle is returned, twelve years after his accidental death, and the police finally declare their failure to nab the guilty truck driver.

On the day the Emergency is declared, 26 June 1975, Dina starts a new venture as supplier of dresses to Au Revoir exports. She dares to hope that her difficult days are over. But, the Emergency leaves her anxious. She finds solace in the warm bonds with her tailors Ishvar and Om, and her paying-guest Maneck. The harsh laws enacted daily, push her to bankruptcy. When government repression reaches its peak, Dina, the tailors and Maneck respond by "sailing under one flag". Out of dire necessity, they live and work together in Dina's tiny flat. United by their youthful enjoyment of Bombay, their opposition to political tyranny and their longing for their lost families, Om and Maneck become fast friends; while Dina and Ishvar, toughened by age and adversity, assume the role of their parents. Barriers of class, caste, creed, age, gender come crumbling down as they form a happy, loving, dignified 'family'.

The prevailing lawlessness and suspension of fundamental rights encourages Dina's landlord to evict weak tenants. Though Dina resists bravely, her flat is vandalised and the inmates assaulted. When the tailors leave for their village to get Om married, and Maneck leaves for home after his exams, she eagerly awaits their return. The tailors victimised by the family planning scam, return months later as mutilated beggars, while Maneck is forced to earn a living in the Gulf. Dina is thrown out of her flat. The draconian Emergency laws ensure that she loses the battle for independent identity. When she hears of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, she reiterates that she is no criminal. Stoically battling grief and despair, she returns as servant to her ancestral mansion, displaying dignified resignation before her taunting brother. Yet, her secret friendship with her tailors-turned-beggars, whom she feeds in her brother's best china, shows her continuing subversion. This is a strong woman who knowing full well the inevitable tragedy of life, turns into a bemused spectator of the human drama. Her spirit remains undefeated, her empathy for human suffering grows, and she still laughs with her tailors, for she has never learned to afford the luxury of regret.

On the other hand, ruthless capitalists like Dina's brother Nusswan and her employer Mrs. Gupta, see the Emergency as a new renaissance and a good medicine for the bad habits and indiscipline of the third world. The

elite support the elimination of the poor and the jailing of trade unionists. Mrs Gupta says,

> 'Thank God the Prime Minister has taken firm steps...We are lucky to have someone strong at a dangerous time like this.'(p.74)

In contrast, Ibrahim, the ancient, entertaining rent-collector of Dina's flat, underlines the plight of the poor. Each day of government repression finds him sinking lower and joining the long list of exploiters-cum-exploited. He laments,

> '...the world is controlled by wicked people, we have no chance. These Emergency times are terrible...Justice is sold to the highest bidder.'(p.432)

The second strand of the plot is constituted by Dina Dalal's tailors from the village. Ishvar Darji, the forty-six year old lower caste tailor, reaches Bombay with his seventeen year old nephew Omprakash, to escape poverty and upper caste tyranny. Bewildered by the chaos and filth of the slums, they long to return. Ishvar, endearingly warm and trusting, laughs his way through troubles, and advises his nephew Om to accept life patiently and keep fighting. Born with the smell of animal-hide in his blood, Ishvar knows the limits that an untouchable *chamaar* or leather-worker should never cross. His family had caused a furore by abandoning cobbling and taking up tailoring. Upon the murder of his entire family by upper caste landlords, with no hope of justice from the police or judiciary, he had to escape to Bombay for the sake of educated Om's future. Shy, witty, cautious and short-tempered, Om endures trials for the sake of the dreams Bombay offers. He secretly thirsts to avenge the murder of his family.

Ironically, the first assignment of the tailors is stitching for politicians, who buy votes by distributing free clothes. They find permanent employment with Dinabai, even as they fight for basic necessities in the ruthless city. The harsh Emergency laws send their lives into a rapid downward spiral, whether it is the demand to undergo sterilisation to obtain ration cards, or cruel punishment for alleged ticketless travel. Ishvar asks innocently,

> 'Dinabai, what is this Emergency we hear about?' 'Government problems – games by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us.' 'That's what I said', murmured Omprakash. 'My uncle was simply worrying.'(p.75)

But, their baptism by fire begins, when they, along with thousands from the slums and villages surrounding Bombay, are forcibly taken by the police and Congress party workers to Indira Gandhi's public rally. The next blow is the sudden razing of their slum under the new Beautification Laws. Homeless, they finally learn to live on pavements. The third persecution comes, when they are picked up from the streets, along with other homeless, and forced into hard, bonded labour on government construction sites where they almost die of starvation and torture, before they are freed by the Beggarmaster. Says Ishvar,

> 'Stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters.' (p.383)

The tailors are extremely grateful to find a home in Dina's flat. Before losing this precious stability, Ishvar is obstinate about finding a wife for Om. Back in their town, they are confronted by their old enemy, the upper-caste landlord Thakur Dharamsi, who is now a top Congress leader and makes a huge profit out of his Family Planning Centre. The tailors, along with hundreds of villagers, are forcibly sterilised. The Thakur forces doctors to castrate Om. Ishvar develops an infection as a result of medical negligence and both his legs are amputated. The novelist observes,

> "The sterilisation programme was supposed to target married men who already had two or more children. But inevitably it was misused to settle old scores and several unmarried youths were sterilised, especially in the villages. Almost all of them belonged to the lower/lowest castes and had usually done something to annoy the upper castes in the villages." (p. 109)

The once optimistic Ishvar now desires to die rather than be a burden to others, but Om encourages him to live. The tailors display superhuman strength to return to Bombay, live for each other, and survive by begging. They crack jokes as Om pulls crippled Ishvar on a wheeled platform. The shadow of the Emergency looms large over their lives, crushing their dreams, changing their entire existence, searing their souls.

The parents of Ishvar, Dukhi Mochi and Roopa, exemplify the tragic quest of the dalits for dignity, in a democracy sans liberty and equality. Dukhi, the cobbler, and his ancestors, are accustomed to torture, as members of an accursed, unclean caste. Dukhi creates a revolution by believing in Gandhi's message to the *harijans* in the 1940s, subverting the caste-system and sending his sons to town to become skilled tailors. The novel comments,

> "And consternation was general throughout the village: someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste, retribution was bound to be swift." (p.95)

Dukhi's younger son Narayan Darji, the father of Om, angers Thakur Dharamsi when he opposes vote-rigging in local elections and demands the right to vote freely. He and his family are brutally tortured and killed.

Old Ashraf, the noble Muslim tailor, is friend to Dukhi Mochi and guru to his sons. During the Partition, Dukhi's sons rescue his family from Hindu mobs. Years after independence, capitalist forces destroy his small business. Ashraf laments about the Emergency:

> 'To listen to the things happening in our lifetime is like drinking venom...Every day I pray that this evil cloud over our country will lift...'(p.521)

He speaks thus of the forced sterilisation:

> 'Actually, we tailors...show more consideration for fabric than these monsters show for humans. It is our nation's shame.'(p.524)

He is killed in the police crackdown to round up people for Family Planning surgeries.

In the slums of Bombay where the tailors live, several characters embody the wretchedness of the poor, especially during Emergency. Rajaram, the hair-collector, satirizes the failure of the Indian welfare state. When slum demolition destroys his hair-collections, he becomes a government family–planning motivator, until social ostracisation forces him to back off. He ends up killing people for their hair, and post-Emergency resurfaces as the billionaire godman Bal Baba. The Monkey-man loses his livelihood, as a result of the Prime Minister's public rallies. Confined to a government labour camp, he resumes entertaining with his dangerous 'balancing tricks' involving two children, which invites public wrath. When he is battered and the children maimed and made beggars, he ends up as a murderer.

The third strand of the novel centres on Dina Dalal's paying guest, Maneck Kolah from the mountains. He is the son of Dina's classmate Aban, and belongs to a reputed middle-class Parsi family. Extremely kind and trusting, he easily bonds with Dina and the tailors. His warmth unites them. Unable to accept evil, his poetic sensibilities often lead him into depression.

The idyllic life of Maneck's family, in the northern mountains, is destroyed by the interference of politicians and multi-national firms. In the

name of progress, the hills are denuded of forest cover; poverty and slums follow. Aggressive competition by giant companies destroys their small family business based on goodwill. An unwilling Maneck is sent to Bombay, to get ahead in life. His landing in Bombay coincides with the Emergency. The reign of terror and censorship gags academicians and Maneck's college campus becomes a haven for political gang-wars and every illegal activity. The suffering of Dina and her tailors makes him rebellious and despondent. He has to contend with the political murder of his dear friend Avinash, a patriotic student leader. He visualises life as a game of chess wherein he and all those dear to him lose to powerful forces. He begins to abhor life itself:

> "Everything ended badly. And memory only made it worse... Unless you lost your mind. Or committed suicide. The slate wiped clean. No more remembering, no more suffering." (p.336)

The national turmoil forces Maneck's parents to send him to work as engineer in the Gulf, in 1976. Rootless and alienated, Maneck returns to India in 1984, days after the assassination of Premier Mrs. Gandhi, for his father's funeral. In Delhi, the dismal national scene again depresses him. He is caught up in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, and the only available taxi is that of a Sikh driver who apprises him about the ground realities:

> 'That's a very long time, sahab....you left before the Emergency ended....for ordinary people, nothing has changed...Living each day is to face one Emergency or another.' (p.581)

As Maneck watches the shaven driver, the plight of the hunted Sikh minorities sears his mind. The death of his father, and the news of the suicides of his friend Avinash's sisters, for want of dowry, make him miserable. Yet, he boldly decides to begin life anew in India. However, upon visiting Bombay, the pathetic state of Dina and the sight of the tailors as beggars, ends his desire to live. Clutching Avinash's chess-set (that stands for the lost game of life), he calmly walks onto the path of an express train. Maneck's intellectual sensitivity proves to be his undoing. The deadly Emergency and its lingering aftermath doom this 'Greek tragic hero'. According to Robert L. Ross, Maneck's suicide is an act of political despair and he "finally succumbs to ... the hypocrisy of his country's government" (qtd. in Herbert 18).

All of Maneck's loved ones are victimised by national politics of the seventies. His father, Mr. Kolah, overcomes the trauma of the 1947 Partition, but is shattered when his beloved mountains are destroyed by politics and corporate globalization. Maneck's roommate Avinash, the

student leader, bravely fights against official apathy and nepotism. His hopes in Jayaprakash Narayan's student-based reform movement are quashed by the Emergency. Congress party gangs terrorize professors and students. His promising life is cruelly snuffed out in police custody, leaving his old, poor parents devastated. Another friend of Maneck and the tailors, Shankar, the cheerful limbless beggar, too, is not spared. Shankar's compassion for fellow-beings mocks the dictatorial regime. His funeral procession, attended by hordes of poor and crippled, is mistaken by the police for a dramatic satire on the government. It is a silent assertion by the weak against a government that denies them the right to exist.

Among other figures who form minor sub-plots in the novel, Sergeant Kesar, is a pathetic specimen of the Indian police during the Emergency. The system forces him to be cruel to the helpless and suffer a guilty conscience, in order to feed his family. The professional Beggarmaster, who turns the poor into beggars and acts as their benevolent guardian, seems far better than the government. Vasantrao Valmik, whom Maneck meets on a train journey, is a lawyer, proof-reader and speech-writer. A chronicler of national history, he articulates the central theme of the novel - one has to accept all and rebuild endlessly:

> 'You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair...In the end, it's all a question of balance.' (p.231)

The pathetically comic Valmik, who changes chameleon-like to suit the political scene, with Yeatsian speeches on the decline of the nation, is a satire on the Indian polity.

Emergency and After; Dalit Chronicles; Urbanisation

Rohinton Mistry offers an insider's view of Bombay and India in the seventies. The administrative failure and the resultant widespread unrest are used to re-create the backdrop against which the Emergency is declared. When there is a suicide on the railway tracks, public conversation goes thus:

> 'Maybe it has to do with the Emergency'...'Prime Minister made a speech...about the country being threatened from inside.' 'Sounds like one more government tamasha.'... 'Murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death – everything ends up delaying the trains...'(p.5, 6)

During the early days of the Emergency, while most people remain ambivalent, some see it as enforcement of discipline in public life. Later, the enormous might of the government machinery crushes so many lives.

Mistry stands out for his depiction of the impact of the Emergency on the lowliest. All over the city, billboards and scary posters proclaim the dissolution of fundamental rights and carry stern visages of Mrs. Gandhi. The novelist observes satirically,

> "The advertisements had been replaced by the Prime Minister's pictures, proclaiming: 'Iron Will! Hard Work! These will sustain us!....Her cheeks were executed in the lurid pink of cinema billboards....Her eyes evoked the discomfort of a violent itch...a cross between a sneer and the vinegary sternness of a drill mistress had crept across the mouth...that familiar swatch of white hair over the forehead....had plopped across the scalp like the strategic droppings of a very large bird." (p.180, 181)

Policemen use the strict laws to flaunt their power. All sorts of corruption flourish. With all rights suspended, jails are full of people, ranging from opposition leaders to students to petty tailors who had demanded overdue payments from influential clients.

The novelist views the Emergency through the eyes of the slum-dwellers, officially 'non-existent' citizens, yet, those most affected by government decisions. Jungle-law prevails as policemen, gangsters and the unscrupulous wealthy appropriate all powers. Profit-hungry middlemen cram people into hellish slums. Even as mobile family- planning clinics gherao slum dwellers, pressurised government servants sink to inhuman levels to complete the sterilization quotas. The description of Indira Gandhi's public rally, "the comic circus", is full of stinging criticism. When Congressmen approach slum-dwellers, this exchange takes place:

> 'The Prime Minister's message is that she is your servant, and wants to help you.'... 'If she is our servant, tell her to come here! ...Ask your men with the cameras to pull some photos of our lovely houses, our healthy children! Show that to the Prime Minister!' (p.258)

The incentives offered to attend the rally, the forcible loading of all public transport with the hapless poor, the lavish arrangements out of public funds, the aerial descent of Mrs. Gandhi and son Sanjay Gandhi (referred to as Mother India and the Son, the glorious future of India), the shameful sycophancy of politicians, the warning to the media and the opposition, Mrs. Gandhi's arrogance contrasted with her father Nehru's humility, and the fainting, terrorised crowds - it is all there in Mistry's detailed

rendering! Mrs. Gandhi is shown to deliver speeches, divorced from reality and replete with veiled threats:

> 'There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make things better for ordinary people....There is a foreign hand involved against us... support the government, support the Emergency.' (p.265-266)

The local administration deceptively and abruptly razes slums as part of the new national beautification laws. There is mayhem as crowds are mowed down by bulldozers. Ironically, the poor who cheer the Premier's rallies, are made homeless overnight. Hoardings declaring 'The Nation is on the Move' make passers-by wonder about the sanity of the government. In another mindless law, policemen are ordered to rid the streets of the homeless and beggars. Made inhuman under pressure, government servants look at every person as quota or additional commission. At the delusive employment havens provided by the government, starving women, elderly and children are forced to render free labour on hellish work-sites. When they turn into cripples with festering wounds, they are sold to beggar masters.

Mistry portrays the decay spreading swiftly into every sphere. He gives a comprehensive picture of the effect of national politics on youth. Jungle-law and censorship stifles college campuses. The education system sinks into decadence as the ruling party harnesses it for propaganda. In scenes reminiscent of Nazi or Communist dictatorships, shame-faced professors are forced to swear allegiance to the government. On the other hand, Dina Dalal's experience in court exposes the chaos and corruption in the judiciary. Hotels sport pictures of Mrs. Gandhi, "the goddess of protection", to prevent loot and vandalism. Letters bear menacing postal marks inscribed 'an era of discipline'. When Shiv Sena hooligans use brute force in public places, it is obvious how politicians feast on fear, on the poverty of the lower class, the ignorance of the middle class and the apathy of the upper class. Everywhere, the powerful trample upon the weak. Desperation breeds criminals among the have-nots. For instance, the Monkey-man, Beggarmaster, rent-collector Ibrahim, and Rajaram the hair-collector, are both persecutors and persecuted. All the new laws are turned into 'games'. Despite surplus foodgrain production, black-marketing leads to starvation-deaths.

The chapter titled 'Family Planning' is a scathing indictment of the unpardonable, inhuman conduct of the government family planning campaign, during the Emergency. This measure intended to curb population explosion, becomes a nasty farce - first luring illiterate poor with gifts,

then faulty operations causing deaths, and finally forcible operations performed in the guise of free medical check-ups. People are rounded up like cattle by the police, and taken to sterilization camps in open fields - makeshift tents with office desks used as operating tables. Operations are performed on unmarried teenagers, the elderly and even those already sterilized once. Government administrators compel doctors to use unsterilized equipment, in order to meet deadlines. Local politicians brag before the helpless victims.

Thus, the novel depicts how the Emergency makes the state a terrifying predator. The worst rule the roost. Despite its absolute powers, the government dreads public anger. Hence, the political murders and gagging of the media. The poetic declamations of Vasantrao Valmik capture the state of the nation:

> '... judgement has fled to brutish beasts... leaders have exchanged wisdom and good governance for cowardice and self-aggrandizement. ...the highest court...turns the Prime Minister's guilt into innocence. ...things falling apart, centre not holding, anarchy loosed upon the world...' (p.561-566)

In the epilogue, Mistry uses Maneck Kolah's return to India and his poring over old newspapers, to sketch individual and national destiny from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. Even after the Emergency is lifted, the suffering of the commoners due to the omissions and commissions of the government machinery continues. Mistry lambasts the failure of the Janata party's coalition government to deliver justice to the victims of the Emergency despite tall claims. Indira Gandhi and her Congress party first lose power, then return to power. Even as the media exalts Mrs. Gandhi as a ‘goddess’, the country is mired in insurgency and separatism. Maneck's taxi driver criticises Mrs. Gandhi’s policies:

> 'Same way all her problems started. With her own mischief-making ... She gave her blessing to the guns and bombs, and then these...began hitting her own government. How do they say in English - all her chickens came home for roasting...'(p.581, 582)

Maneck Kolah lands in Delhi amid the infamous 1984 anti-Sikh riots which have their own bloody history. In the process of flushing out separatist militants from Punjab, Premier Mrs. Gandhi had hurt the religious sentiments of the minority Sikh community. In retribution, she is assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. This leads to widespread anti-Sikh riots. Mistry portrays the riots as a genocide orchestrated by the ruling party, and not as a spontaneous reaction on the part of the masses, as the

government interpreted it. The lament of the Sikh taxi-driver, who ferries Maneck from the airport, mirrors Mistry's vociferous contempt:

> 'The real murderers will never be punished. For power and votes they play with human lives. Today it is Sikhs. Last year it was Muslims; before that, Harijans. One day your Sudra and Kusti might not be enough to protect you... ' (p.583)

Mistry also suggests that Mrs. Gandhi's son Rajiv takes over as Prime Minister, in an India beset with massive economic disparities.

The novel also depicts a nation chained by the caste system, through the story of the low caste tailors Ishvar and Om and their ancestors, dating back to the British era. The lowest castes or *shudras* are punished in order to uphold the 'sacrosanct' caste system - a dalit (untouchable) girl is whipped for not sweeping away her footprints cleanly, molten lead is poured into the ears of a dalit man who has accidentally heard sacred chants, dalit women are raped in exchange for food for their starving children, dalit children are flogged for approaching the village school, and so on. The dalits are forbidden to cast their shadows near the upper-castes or to be seen near communal temples or wells. A ray of hope is offered to the dalits by the Gandhian movement and their revolutionary spirit exemplifies their changing national roles. When upper-caste leaders try to whip up hatred for Muslims during the 1947 Partition riots, the dalits remember that their Muslim brothers had treated them kindly when the upper-caste Hindus had oppressed them. Even after independence, the landlords, politicians, bureaucrats and police oppress the dalits. Dukhi Mochi and his family are decimated for abandoning their traditional occupation of cobbling for tailoring and for demanding the right to cast their vote freely. During the Emergency, the upper-caste Congress politician Thakur Dharamsi uses the harsh family-planning laws to destroy Dukhi Mochi's son Ishvar and grandson Om.

Finally, Rohinton Mistry's portrait of India in the seventies and eighties, demonstrates how modernisation ushered in pro-corporate policies, wiping out village life and small entrepreneurs. The slum-life of Dina Dalal's tailors reveals the dark side of glamorous Bombay- slums overflowing with impoverished villagers, pavement dwellers killing each other for space, middlemen and local politicians exploiting the needy by monopolising public resources. In Maneck Kolah's native northern region, flawed policies and vote-bank politics destroys the ecosystem –

> "..the mountains began to leave them. It started with roads....wide and heavy duty, to replace scenic mountain paths too narrow for the broad

> vision of nation-builders and World Bank officials.....they condemned the flawed development policy, the short-sightedness, the greed that was sacrificing the country's natural beauty to the demon of progress." (p.215)

A number of post-colonial issues related to the Third World are also raised in *A Fine Balance*. The family of Maneck Kolah and their neighbours, especially the retired army officers, feel that freedom has betrayed many of their hopes, especially with the experience of Partition, the continuing aimlessness and falling standards in public life. Several characters in the plot are victims of poverty augmented by the government's neo-colonial policies. In the developed world, the Emergency leads to ridicule of Indian democracy and Indians are referred to as "third world beggars".

Brutal Realism, Impeccable Symbolism

Rohinton Mistry's perfectly crafted plot paints Bombay with empathy, diving into the centre of the whirlpool. Bombay becomes his first character and co-author, giving form and colour to his men and women. The commoners of this 'unreal city' witness the pettiness of their leaders. Their enterprise, generosity and resilience, undermines inhuman power-centres. Mistry not only identifies with his characters but imbues them with redeeming grace. For instance, he speaks almost as a member of the suffering untouchable community in the village of Dina's tailors. In Bombay, characters like Ibrahim, Mrs. Gupta, Vasantrao Valmik, highlight Mistry's Dickensian humour. The warm bonds between Dina and her tailors offer the last moments of deceptive delight before the monstrous Emergency devours everything. Again, the characters in *A Fine Balance* present so many real vignettes of Indian life. The denizens of the slums, the lower middle class, even beggars and the homeless counter government tyranny with humanity and humour. The state functionaries fail those they ought to serve first. The emotional toll that the Emergency extracts is poignantly brought out, whether it is Dina's loneliness, Maneck's despair or the anguish of the tailors. The heartlessness of the state is matched only by the nobility of the commoners. Dina's home becomes a precious source of light in the deep darkness. Humanity finally triumphs over the Emergency.

Rohinton Mistry uses brutal realism to describe everyday India. His accurate, detailed observations and the understated narrative, bring alive both dingy slums and the Parsi culture. With extraordinary sensitivity, he deals with equal expertise in childhood scenes, old-world romance, hilarious humour and heart-wrenching pathos. His style ranges from dry

wit to black humour to the gruesome and pathological. Mistry's use of language to suit the lowly station of his protagonists challenges traditional hegemonies and hierarchies.

The novelist's use of symbols and juxtaposition of images is impeccable. The protagonist Dina Dalal feels that the lives of the poor are rich in symbols. The locales are named symbolically to suggest their universality – 'City by the Sea', 'Village by the River' and 'Mountains'. Another powerful symbol is Dina's patchwork quilt. Its varied scraps not only symbolise the integration of the joys and sorrows of Dina, the tailors and Maneck, but also the effort to sustain the unity of a diverse nation. 'Balance' is the predominant motif. The existentialist theme of struggle for survival is seen throughout - whether it is Ishvar and Dina learning to balance contradictions or Om and Maneck realising that good and bad are inseparable. Balancing is risky yet essential for survival. There is no balance in the public arena, but only in the personal. In spite of the dismal picture, Mistry reiterates the ability of the citizen to maintain a fine balance, to believe in democracy, to adapt and rebuild:

> 'There is always hope - hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost.' (p.563)

Critical Review

A Fine Balance covers the time span between 1933 and 1984, but the focus is always on the Emergency, with due attention given to the pre-Emergency and post-Emergency years. Prof. Viney Kirpal writes, "The Emergency, as a theme was favoured by a number of postmodern Indian English novelists who saw in it the rare opportunity to challenge official versions of history, and re-write it" (Kirpal, 19-20). The Emergency is referred to or depicted in novels like- Balwant Gargi's *The Naked Triangle* (1979), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Raj Gill's *The Torch Bearer* (1983), Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985), Manohar Malgonkar's *The Garland Keepers* (1986), O.V.Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (1988), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) and Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* (1990). Mistry's novel is one of the very few dealing directly and graphically with the Emergency. Both Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* and Mistry's *A Fine Balance* speak of the death of conscience, especially on the part of the elite, during the Emergency. Like Mistry, Arun Joshi in *The City and The River* condemns the reign of terror. Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* and Shashi Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel*, use post-modern devices to depict the era. According to critics, Rushdie's novel is intellectually brilliant, but

Mistry's genial approach directly involves the reader in the horrors of 1975-77(Dangwal 76; Ball 86; Thorpe 225). Both Mistry and Tharoor question the failures of the Indira Gandhi regime, but while Tharoor tries to morally reconstruct India, Mistry opines that man is bound to the decrees of fate (Shah 157).

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* offers a poignant yet objective account of the personal and the national vis-a-vis contemporary historical issues. Mistry starts with a picture of the nation in the post-Nehru era. After the death of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, the nation was tested by famine, inflation, unemployment, regionalism, corruption and Naxalism. Against this backdrop, Nehru' daughter Indira Gandhi was elected the first woman Prime Minister of India. The triumph in the 1971 Bangladesh war and the poverty eradication campaign were her achievements. However, the economic crisis continued. Loss of public confidence in the administration led to widespread violent bandhs and agitations. According to historian Prof. Ramchandra Guha, "....the late 1960s are reminiscent of the late 1940s, likewise a time of crisis and conflict, of resentment along lines of class, religion, ethnicity and region, of a centre that seemed barely to hold" (Guha 433).

Secondly, after making the context clear, Rohinton Mistry hints at the reasons for the declaration of Emergency. Indira Gandhi's authoritarian politics had split the ruling Congress party. In order to deal with the economic crisis, she adopted populist policies that soon gave way to centralized, personalized governance. According to Lord Meghnad Desai, Mrs. Gandhi felt that she had the mandate to change the Constitution and challenge the judiciary (Desai 356-358). However, strong public agitations and attacks by opposition parties, especially the socialists led by the famous Jayaprakash Narayan, challenged her authority. The 12 June 1975 judgement of the Allahabad High Court held her guilty of election malpractices. Ultimately, her government declared a state of internal Emergency, on the grounds that the nation was being threatened by internal and external enemies, thus dissolving the Parliament, jailing all opponents and imposing draconian laws that usurped all fundamental rights. Mrs. Gandhi's henchmen were elevated to the highest offices. Arundhati Roy opines "When Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency at midnight on 25 June, 1975 she did it to crush an incipient revolution" (Roy, *Broken Republic* 180).

Thirdly, Rohinton Mistry offers one of the clearest pictures of the Emergency itself. Perhaps India's greatest political crisis since independence, it is a blot on Indian democracy. It not only violated the Constitution but also universal human rights. In the West, there was a

unanimous feeling that India's democratic experiment had ended (Tharoor 202). The government's ambitious twenty-point programme for national development failed miserably, due to the excesses of power-hungry Congress politicians led by Mrs. Gandhi's son Sanjay and the abuse of power by corrupt bureaucrats and policemen. Every section of society was alienated from the government. Ironically, in November 1976, Mrs. Gandhi said, "...the country has developed a disease...So we gave this bitter medicine to the nation" (Guha 94, 95). As a historian puts it, "Indira Gandhi was convinced, as dictators often are, that if she were to quit there would be no one else to lead India.... that she was the prime cause of the unrest did not occur to her" (Desai 360). Political scientist Atul Kohli opines, "Leaders may not be able to turn democracy on and off, but Indira Gandhi came close" (Kohli 137).

Rohinton Mistry's insider-outsider status helps to view the Emergency from different angles. Despite his stay in Canada, his visits to India and his following of media stories have kept him updated about the state of the nation. In an interview soon after the publication of *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry said, "It seemed to me that 1975, the year of the Emergency would be the next important year, if one was preparing a list of important dates in Indian History. And so it was 1975" (qtd. in Dangwal 72). In his unsparing record of the twenty-two months that India spends as the world's largest banana republic, every atrocity of the times occurs to his characters. Mistry goes beyond his ethno-religious identity to a wide space. What agitates him most is Indira Gandhi's brand of power politics. His sympathies lie with the victimised citizen and he scathingly attacks the government and its elite supporters.

Mistry focuses on the three major thrusts of the Emergency era - population control, slum demolition and city beautification, from the perspective of the poorest. He provides the slum's point of view of Indian politics. The slum embodies the mass of discarded citizens who propel the engines of civic life, but are an embarrassment to the elite. Mistry engages with the paradox that, while slum-dwellers are passive sufferers, they refuse to bow out of history. His documentation of the government atrocities on the poor is verified by numerous authentic records which prove that the appalling human rights abuse was not a rumour created by anti-national elements, as was widely publicized by the government, but a bitter truth. According to historian Meghnad Desai, Sanjay Gandhi's ruthless gangster rule was beyond criticism because of his mother's position. Nearly twenty-three million men were forcibly sterilized. 150,000 shacks of poor Muslims were bulldozed in Delhi alone (Desai 366). Instead of removing poverty, the poor were removed in order to

beautify cities. The family planning campaign struck at the fundamental right to life. Amartya Sen opines that, the coercive family planning measures mostly affected the poorest, and in the 1977 elections, they showed their anger at this violation of liberties. The forced sterilizations jeopardized the voluntary birth control programs (Sen, *Development As Freedom* 224).

Also, Mistry effectively captures the rotten, dictatorial polity degrading every sphere from judiciary to media to education. Mistry's sketch of the chaotic courts is corroborated by former Supreme Court Justice P. Jaganmohan Reddy who recalls how the government sought to subjugate the judiciary and elevated judges favourable to itself to powerful positions (Reddy 55-63). Eminent journalist G.S. Bhargava's *The Press in India – An Overview* likens the brutal suppression of the press during 1975-77 to the censorship under the harshest British governors. Finally, Mistry's account of Maneck's college campus ruled by political gangsters, proves that one of the greatest tragedies was the disillusionment of the youth.

Fourthly, Mistry also sketches the national scene in the post-Emergency era. The defining elections of 1977, which saw Mrs. Gandhi's resounding defeat, revealed the attachment of the masses to democratic values. Yet, her 1980 victory proved that Indian politics had shifted towards populism. Her second term as Premier saw administrative and economic failures and insurgency. Eminent historians concur that Mrs. Gandhi's strategic failures and indecision fuelled separatism in Punjab, Assam and Kashmir (Chandra 343,433). After her murder by Sikh separatists, the government-backed anti-Sikh riots became a black mark in Indian history. Ironically, Mrs. Gandhi's son and future Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's response to the massacre of three thousand Sikhs was, "When a large tree falls, the earth shakes" (qtd. in Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 275) Recently, India's first Sikh Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, apologised to the nation for the genocide which he termed as a negation of nationhood and of the Constitution (qtd. in Sen, *Identity and Violence* 168).

Fifthly, there is a negative assessment of the first woman Prime Minister of India - an enigmatic figure, whose prowess led men to declaim, "Indira is India and India is Indira." Echoing Mistry's views, Arundhati Roy writes, "...Indira Gandhi...injected the venom into our political veins" (Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 31). However, historian Bipan Chandra writes, "Possessed of extraordinary will...Indira Gandhi was tough, resolute, decisive, and when necessary, ruthless. ... A major feature of Indira Gandhi's politics was her ... passionate love of the country.., her pride in India's greatness and confidence in its future....A

giant of a person, with many strengths and many weaknesses, Indira Gandhi strode the Indian political stage after independence longer than any other leader....” (Chandra 340, 345).

Sixthly, in many ways, *A Fine Balance* is a significant contribution to dalit literature. It is worth noting that the suppressed aspirations of the dalits and the growing atrocities on them, led to the formation of the revolutionary Dalit Panthers party in 1972 – the era in which the novel is set. K.C. Belliappa says, “There is neither any overt dramatisation nor sentimentalism in the manner in which Mistry portrays their traumatic existence...we get a vivid presentation of the life in a *jhopadpatti*, an evocation rarely seen in Indian English Fiction.” Mistry employs the realistic mode to feelingly describe the brutal repression of the *chamaars* with all its sordid, gory details (Belliappa, “Representation of the Marginalized in Recent Indian English Fiction: A Note” 236). Considering his urbane background, Mistry’s attempt to confront caste issues is very brave, and an extension of mainstream literature towards dalits.

Finally, *A Fine Balance* raises vital issues of globalisation and development. Whether it is rural economies being destroyed, creating slums in metropolises like Bombay, or the destruction of Maneck’s native mountains, Mistry emphasizes the devastating consequences of exclusive development by greedy elites who disregard nature. As C.C. Mishra puts it, “Through his elaborate and sensitive presentation of man-nature relationship, Rohinton Mistry stands out as another spokesperson of the Ecological movement” (Mishra 65).

The Heroic Saga of the Subaltern

Rohinton Mistry’s distance from India seems to give him a truer picture of India, the subject of all his writings. *A Fine Balance* embodies the attempts of this diasporic writer to salvage lost, suppressed or neglected fragments of real national history. Jaydipsinh Dodiya praises Mistry's “very sound knowledge of India’s history” (Dodiya 211, 213). K.C. Belliappa opines, “...Mistry’s fictional discourse achieves ‘A Fine Balance’ between involvement and detachment, thus providing a reliable witness to an eventful era....” (Belliappa, “...Prototypical Realistic Novel” 210-211). Rukmini Bhaya Nair calls Mistry a foremost realist writer, Bombay’s own Balzac, who saves people from numbing amnesia and repetition of sins by recounting the terrors of history (Nair 14-15).

A Fine Balance breaks the long silence of the subaltern. Hilary Mantel rightly calls it an intensely angry, political book full of deceptively cool indignation (Mantel 4). Firstly, it is one of the most powerful fictional

representations of the Emergency, a phase of Indian political history hardly documented in fiction. The citizen-state issues it raises continue to be relevant. Secondly, it rages against all forms of injustice and inequality in the nation. To quote Anjali Gera Roy and Meena T Pillai, "*A Fine Balance* ...systematically sets out to destabilize hegemonies based on caste, gender and class" (Roy and Pillai 21). Thirdly, the novel's protagonists are displaced and isolated in the pitiless metropolis of Bombay. Therefore, as Hutoxi G. Wadia puts it, it captures the complex phenomenon of Indian modernity where citizens are enmeshed by globalization and poverty (Wadia 216).

A Fine Balance also brings out Mistry's deep doubts about the democratic, welfare state in India. He views the government machinery not as an instrument of collective will and welfare, but as a brute, tyrannical force. He writes about the seventies, when the pressures of development and globalization led to the centralization of political authority and the decline of democratic institutions. A crisis of values ensued when the state was separated from its moral imperatives, and the Emergency was its product. Rohinton Mistry's novelistic craft finely grasps the impact of national decisions at the individual level, in an attempt to infuse humanity and responsibility into governance. He records so many sad sagas wherein the government treats citizens like mindless beasts. The simultaneous decline in the lives of the protagonists is a mocking comment on the state. Through Maneck Kolah, the dreamer, Mistry explores the battered soul of a nation. When Maneck dies, it is as if the spirit of India has perished. The grotesque images of the miserable masses culminate in his mangled body. On the other hand, Dina Dalal and her tailors Ishvar and Om portray the hardiness of the Indian citizen that is a spiritual triumph over the state. With laughter and love they resist monstrous forces. Apparently, the citizen has few choices - to perish in idealism like Maneck and his friend Avinash, to resign happily to fate like Dina and the tailors, or to survive by ruthlessness like hair-collector Rajaram or speech-writer Valmik. The individuals, however firm they stand, eventually break, in the face of an omnipotent and cunning system. Yet, Mistry redeems his excessively dark picture of India, by ending with a tribute to the resilience of Dina Dalal and her tailors, suggesting the citizen's potential to create a better future.

Finally, Rohinton Mistry's rendering of the interplay between personal and national destinies, moves beyond a particular community or nation to a mature universalism. Lisa Moody lauds him for so evoking the citizen-state dilemma that it can be generalized to all of humanity (Moody 42-43).

A Fine Balance is all about finely balancing loss and gain, sorrow and joy, despair and hope, in human life. Mistry's story ends where it begins –

> '...The circle is completed.....Loss is part and parcel of that essential calamity called life.' (p.565)

2.4. Narrating a Young Nation-State

The crucial years of the consolidation of the Indian nation-state - 1947 to 1975, have been rendered into art by Gurcharan Das and Rohinton Mistry, in the 1990s. Time leads to a fading of details and passions, but also provides greater clarity and objectivity. These writers depict the impact of the post-1945 global scenario on India. The heady optimism of newly independent colonies was slowly replaced by disillusionment as the expected social and economic freedoms failed to materialize, chiefly due to the neo-colonial policies of the corrupt ruling elite. The period of significant social, political and economic benefits to the masses almost ended by the late sixties. The world stumbled into economic recession and political crisis, followed by a period of U.S. hegemony. Globally, there was a conflict between the welfare state and capitalist systems. However, the democratic ethos of the freedom struggle and the heroism of the commoners salvaged the future of India.

2.5. Two Visions, One Truth

While Gurcharan Das presents an optimistic vision of the nation, Rohinton Mistry's view is darkly pessimistic. Das writes a Partition novel crowded with events, while Mistry writes an Emergency novel, crowded with characters. If Das focuses on the effect of national events on the middle class, Mistry speaks of the lower class. Both novels have autobiographical elements. On the whole, the character of Arjun represents Das while Maneck Kolah represents Mistry. If Arjun emerges victorious after the government onslaughts of 1975, Maneck kills himself in despair. Gurcharan Das sings paeans to the perseverance and initiative of the middle classes. But Rohinton Mistry condemns their passive response to the tyranny of the ruling elite.

Thus, the two novelists present two contrasting yet equally true views of Indian democracy, of the interface between personal and national destinies. Between 1947 and 1975, Indian democracy suffered political decay, but, was socially enriched by assertive subaltern groups, civil rights movements and free press. The Partition and communal riots of 1947,

testified to the divisions in Indian society, but saner elements prevailed to isolate anti-social elements and restore harmony. Similarly, the Emergency of 1975 was a monumental aberration of democracy but it led to the re-assertion of democratic values. As T.K.Oommen, the noted sociologist observes, "...when the State erred, civil society stepped in to administer the necessary correctives... the Indian State did allow the required space for civil society to emerge and sustain itself" (Oommen 50).

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CHAPTER III

THE REGIONAL MICROCOSM: TURBULENT GEOPOLITICS (1960-1990)

(ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* AND KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*)

Every Communist must grasp the truth, 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun'.
— Mao Tse Tung

3.1. 1960-1990: The Turbulent Decades

1960 to 1990 were decades of national turbulence and transition, with an equal share of achievements and failures. The period saw the leadership of four Prime Ministers - Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. While regionalism, secessionism and economic crisis threatened India from within, hostile neighbours and troubled subcontinental geo-politics against the backdrop of the US - USSR Cold War threatened her from without. Yet, India survived by dint of the invincible spirit of her people who resolved to put the nation first, to choose humanism and peace over war and strife.

When Prime Minister Nehru passed away in 1964, the glorious project of national integration and modernisation initiated by him had already been hindered by slow agricultural growth, growing economic disparities, corruption and red tapism, extremist left and right wing politics and the setback in the 1962 Indo-China war. Nehru's capable successor Lal Bahadur Shastri strove for progress at the grassroots level. The success in the 1965 war with Pakistan was a feather in his cap. However, his untimely death in 1966 left a void on the national scene. Indira Gandhi, Nehru's

daughter rose to power in 1967. She attained popularity with the victory in the 1971 Bangladesh war and the Green Revolution but had to face public discontent over the economic crisis, food shortages and unemployment. Her authoritarian politics culminated in popular agitations leading to the Emergency of 1975 - a blot on Indian democracy. Mrs. Gandhi lost power in the 1977 elections.

In the eighties, during Mrs. Gandhi's second term as Prime Minister, the spotlight shifted to the states. Regional economic imbalances and exploitation of administrative inefficiency by anti-national elements resulted in the growth of separatism. Anti-state terrorism and insurgency flourished in Kashmir, Punjab and the North-east leading to a civil war-like situation. In the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination and the horrifying genocide of the anti-Sikh riots in 1984, her son Rajiv Gandhi rode to power on a massive sympathy wave. He inherited a troubled legacy but raised hopes of a resurgent India built by the youth. Peace accords were signed with regional separatists. Attempts were made to bolster the economy, curb corruption, encourage local self-governance through Panchayati Raj, initiate an Information Technology revolution and establish cordial foreign relations. However, allegations of corruption in arms deals led to the fall of the government in 1990. The intervention of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in civil war-torn Sri Lanka led to Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by the Sri Lankan guerrilla Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1991.

As regards the reflection of the wider national scene between 1960 and 1990 by Indian English novelists, Nayantara Sahgal highlights the corrupt, turbulent and separatist politics in *This Time of Morning (1965)*, *Storm in Chandigarh (1969), The Day in Shadow* (1971), *A Situation in New Delhi (1979)* and *Rich Like Us (1985*). The contemporary national scene is also reflected by Bhabani Bhattacharya, Arun Joshi, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Manohar Malgonkar and Rohinton Mistry. In this context, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) offer powerful accounts of the interface between individual lives and national scenario in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai are women novelists who have brought global fame to Indian English literature. Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are novels of socio-political realism capturing contemporary eras with insight and precision. They are set roughly in the same period, between 1960 and 1990, in remote rural regions of India – Ayemenam in Kerala (the deep south) and Kalimpong in West Bengal (the Himalayan foothills in the North-East) which become microcosms of the nation at large.

Set in the Communist strongholds of Kerala and West Bengal, these novels deal with the intrusion of caste and class based politics into private lives. According to Prof. B. Parvathi, the novelists, deeply influenced by the political clime, critique the working of communist ideology imported from Russia and China at the grass roots level. She writes, "The success of Communism as the writers see it cannot be measured by its political presence but the actual condition of persons whose lives it professes to change" (Parvathi B. 163-171). The novelists reveal a deep concern for the downtrodden in societies ridden with caste, gender and class conflicts. In both the novels, the tragic drama of human lives is played out against the backdrop of mighty, uncontrollable and callous historical forces. Both novelists use autobiographical writing and landscape to authorize and situate the self and question colonial and conventional narratives. Arundhati Roy's childhood years in Kerala of the sixties and seventies and Kiran Desai's teenage years in the mid-nineteen eighties in West Bengal are reflected strongly in their respective novels.

3.2. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)

Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born in 1961 in West Bengal, to Mary Roy, a well-known social activist and educationist from Kerala, and a Bengali Hindu tea planter. Brought up in Kerala and based in Delhi, she was trained as an architect. She worked as a production designer and wrote screenplays for films. She won the Booker Prize for her only novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), which took the world by storm. Noted critic R.K. Dhawan calls her 'the novelist extraordinary' who has put India on the map of the English speaking world (Dhawan 11). Since then Roy has turned to full-time socio-political activism. In her collections of political essays - *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2005), *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009) and *Broken Republic* (2011), she brilliantly exposes shocking truths about subjects ranging from nuclear weapons and big dams, casteist and communal politics to corporate globalization and the western war on terror. She dissects the underbelly of democracy and progress in India. Her writing, inspired by American rebel writer Noam Chomsky, is often anti-establishment. She declares war on global capitalist hegemonies. She berates the Indian state for repressing public resistance against the elite who monopolise democracy. She fights for the exploited peasantry, oppressed castes, tribals and masses dispossessed by multinational corporations, dams and nuclear projects, and for those turning to Maoist insurgency to fight the unjust system. Naomi Klein opines, 'Reading

Arundhati Roy is how the peace movement arms itself. She turns our grief and rage into courage' (qtd. in Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* blurb).

A controversial figure who remains undaunted by sedition charges and even occasional imprisonment for her fiery views, Arundhati Roy is an active participant in powerful, non-violent civil disobedience movements to empower victimized masses. She believes that writers must speak out against a world order where the powerful annihilate the weak. As she puts it: "...what we need to hone and perfect ...is....the politics of resistance. The politics of opposition. The politics of forcing accountability. The politics of joining hands across the world and preventing certain destruction" (Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 215). She refused the Sahitya Akademi Award in protest against the policies of the Indian government on big dams, nuclear weapons, increasing militarization and economic neoliberalism.

Renowned literary and social theorist Aijaz Ahmad writes, "In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy may well have written the most accomplished, the most moving novel by an Indian author in English" (Ahmad 103). *The God of Small Things,* set in Kerala of the sixties and seventies, is the tragic tale of Ammu, a Syrian Christian divorcee (the mother of twin children Estha and Rahel), and, Velutha, a Hindu untouchable, who commit the unforgivable sin of falling in love across the caste divide. It is Arundhati Roy's fictional autobiography, with the figure of Ammu modelled on her mother Mary Roy, and the twins Rahel and Estha inspired by Arundhati and her brother Lalit. The novel offers a sensitive account of the intervention of unjust societal and religious traditions and opportunistic political and police machineries in the private lives of the victimised protagonists Ammu, Estha, Rahel and Velutha. The recording of history from the perspective of the victims becomes vital:

> "...a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. ...those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house...must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for. Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story." (p.32, 33)

Arundhati Roy's crusade is for the secondary citizens of free India. In an interview, she reiterates that her novel is political and subversive like her non-fiction since it exposes the intrusion of history and politics into private life (*The Shape of the Beast* 36). As Ranga Rao puts it, "Roy's book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities

against minorities, Small Things: children and youth, women and untouchables." He calls it a radical and subversive novel, unprecedented in its taboo-breaking (qtd. in Khushu-Lahiri 112).

Small Gods and Big Gods

One strand of the plot in *The God of Small Things* is formed by Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel, victims of both society and state, 'The Gods of Small Things'.

Ammu, the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi of Ayemenem House, escapes from her chauvinistic and abusive father in Kerala, only to marry an alcoholic Bengali tea-estate manager. When he asks her to satisfy the lust of his boss to save his job, twenty-three year old Ammu walks out with her three year old twins. She returns unwelcomed to her home where she has always been discriminated against. While she is never sent to college, her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford. While her mother accepts Chacko's marriage with a foreigner and sympathises with his divorce, she is ostracised for her inter-religious marriage and subsequent divorce. Her sufferings make her empathise with the underdog. Her effrontery shocks people. Deep inside her lies an untamed and sensuous woman who knows her life has been lived, her choice proved wrong, who aches for true love and a full life. Her affectionate and independent persona comes to the fore in her meticulous upbringing of her kids. She combines –

> "the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber." (p.44)

Ammu finds her soul-mate in her childhood friend, the untouchable servant Velutha. The high point of her life is the thirteen nights she spends with him, crossing forbidden lines of class and caste. She sees eternity in small joys, aware of the inevitable doom. Ammu is punished when her affair is exposed. Her lover is falsely implicated and killed in police custody. She almost destroys her aunt Baby Kochamma's careful scheming by standing up to the humiliation at the police station and acknowledging her relationship with Velutha. But it is too late to save him and she can never forgive herself. Baby Kochamma decides that dangerous Ammu should be put out of her way and instigates Chacko to make her leave. Her family separates her beloved twins from her. She bravely strives to earn a living so that she might live with her children. Broken-hearted and stricken with asthma, she dies destitute and lonely, at thirty-one. The Church refuses to bury her. At the government crematorium, the vibrant persona of the rebellious feminine is finally confined to a numbered urn.

Young and handsome Velutha belongs to the wretched untouchable community of Pulayans and Paravans. His family have been old servants of Ayemenem House. He has a high school education and is a highly skilled carpenter. Ammu's mother Mammachi admits that had he not been an untouchable, he might have become an engineer. She exploits his indispensible skills but pays him less to assuage the touchable workers. Velutha's self-assurance contrasts with his father Vellyapapen, an old world Paravan, perpetually indebted to Ayemenem House. Vellyapapen's anxiety for Velutha leads to conflicts between them-

> "It was not *what* he said, but the *way* he said it. Not *what* he did but the *way* he did it...a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel" (p 76).

Being a card holding member of the Communist party, Velutha is generally seen as a threat.

Genuine, affectionate, witty and imaginative, he has a way with children. Ammu's twins find in him a friend and a father figure. In his unconditional love for Ammu, he inverts history's unchallengeable laws. He consciously takes the enormous risk of reciprocating the love of an upper caste and upper class woman, despite his own Marxist anti-capitalist affiliations. Shocked by the sudden public revelation of his affair, his first concern is for Ammu. He reacts in an admirably dignified way to Mammachi's raging insults and threats –

> "he...had known, with an ancient instinct, that one day History's twisted chickens would come home to roost... It was a composure born of extreme provocation. It stemmed from a lucidity that lies beyond rage." (p.283)

Yet, the novelist reminds,

> "Though the rain washed Mammachi's spit off his face, it didn't stop the feeling that somebody had lifted off his head and vomited into his body." (p.286)

Velutha seeks help from Comrade Pillai, the local leader of the 'pro-poor' Communist party. Pillai uses the chance to eliminate this 'untouchable' party worker- a danger to his own political ambitions. Ammu's aunt Baby Kochamma files a false FIR accusing Velutha of molesting Ammu and kidnapping her children. In consultation with Comrade Pillai, Inspector Matthew arrests Velutha. As punishment for violating the sacred caste

restrictions, the defenceless man is brutally tortured to death in police custody. All evidence of his innocence is wiped out. His corpse is dumped along with criminals and paupers. His death is labelled a 'police encounter' and used for political mileage by the local Communist party. In his conscious subversion of the social order, his moral courage and dignity, his non-violent approach and preparedness to face the consequences of his actions, Velutha almost becomes a revolutionary. Nevertheless, he is no crusader or hero, only the cheerful God of Small but Precious Things, of Loss, unable to fight the shadows that surround him, crushed nonchalantly and pitilessly by the big gods of society and state. As the novelist puts it,

> "He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors." (p.216)

Estha and Rahel - brother and sister, children of Ammu and her Bengali husband, have a traumatic childhood filled with the longing for a 'normal' family life. Abandoned by an alcoholic father and brought up by a socially ostracised mother, these intelligent and endearing twins dote on their mother. In their maternal home in Ayemenem, they are treated like hateful monsters – the offspring of a Hindu father and a Christian mother who has left her husband. Estha is also physically abused by a stranger. When Ammu is berated for her liaison with Velutha, she vents her frustration upon her twins. When they, along with their cousin Sophie, try to run away by crossing the river Meenachal, Sophie is drowned. They become pawns in their grand-aunt Baby Kochamma's plan to annihilate Velutha and are forced to testify against him. They are told that if they do not accuse Velutha of kidnapping them and causing Sophie's death, Ammu would be jailed on the charge of killing Sophie. The sight of their dear friend Velutha's mangled body in the police station haunts them forever:

> "The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said Yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt." (p.320)

Detested by all and accused of Sophie's death, they are separated from each other and from Ammu. Estha is returned to his father in the north. By the age of seven, they learn how the world breaks men. While Estha ends up as a half-insane youth, Rahel witnesses her mother's pathetic death and ends up as a divorcee. They realise that Velutha's death has left them with eternal pain, guilt and loneliness. Nothing can purchase for them the priceless exoneration:

> 'You're not the Sinners. You're the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the *victims*, not the perpetrators.' (p.191)

The return of the twins to Ayemenem House after long years is destiny's quest to reclaim the past. Estha's self-alienation and empty silence is symbolic of the oppressed who always blend into the background. In his walks around decadent Ayemenem he resembles Tiresias in Eliot's 'Wasteland'. Divorced and jobless, Rahel is like Ammu, without any plans or 'Locusts Stand I'. She epitomises the enforced optimism of the downtrodden:

> '...in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kind of despair competed for primacy....*personal* despair could never be desperate enough...when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind and demanded obeisance. Then Small God...Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing mattered much...Because Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening.'(p.19)

The lives of the talented twins end tragically, while Lenin the mediocre son of the Communist politician Comrade Pillai who is no small way responsible for their ruin, is made a successful businessman. Their fathomless tragedy reaches its grotesque culmination in their incestuous union, both a perversion and assertion of individual freedom versus societal norms. Like Ammu and Velutha before them, they break the love laws.

The second strand of the plot in *The God of Small Things* is constituted by the powerful victimisers, 'The Gods of Big Things' – Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Chacko, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew. While Comrade Pillai and Inspector Mathew represent the corrupt and ruthless political and governmental machinery, the others, who are members of Ammu's family, epitomise tyrannical social orthodoxy.

Ammu's father Benaan John Ipe alias Pappachi, the scion of the reputed Ayemenem House and a government entomologist, is an incorrigible Anglophile. He represents the contemporary male-dominated society. Frustrated by the inefficient bureaucratic set-up in Delhi that credits his discovery of a moth to someone else, he changes into a malicious man. His public image is that of a perfect gentleman and philanthropist, but, at home,

he transforms into a monster who tortures his wife and daughter. The heartless 'Pappachi's moth' continues to haunt generations. The damage he inflicts on his family members destroys their lives.

Pappachi's wife Soshamma Ipe alias Mammachi, suppressed and tortured all her life by her husband, suffers in silence. Strangely, she is blind to the agony of her own daughter Ammu. Her eternal gratitude is towards her son Chacko, who had stopped Pappachi from beating her. After Pappachi's death, she metamorphoses into the matriarch seeking power and wealth. She condemns her divorced daughter while allowing her divorced son to lord over the house and satisfy his lust. She royally welcomes Sophie, Chacko's daughter, and rejects Ammu's children Estha and Rahel. She exploits her untouchable servant Velutha's skills, but is firm that the caste-system should never be tampered with. She keeps his family bound in her service. Unlike her pampered and impractical son Chacko, she is more aware of the dangerous implications of the Marxist revolution for her capitalist class. Once the relationship of Ammu with the untouchable Velutha is discovered, she feels deeply humiliated and vents her ire upon Velutha and his father. Chacko's grief at the loss of his daughter Sophie devastates her and she holds Ammu's children responsible for the same. She pitilessly supports the annihilation of Velutha, the eviction of Ammu and the returning of Estha to his father. Even while Ammu is dying of asthma, she asks her not to visit Rahel. She provides for her granddaughter Rahel, but without any affection. She thus becomes a perpetrator of the same unjust social system that had ruined her own life.

Baby Kochamma is the spinster sister of Pappachi. Frustrated in her love for an Irish priest, she becomes embittered and sadistic. She represents the wealthy who manipulate the socio-political mechanism. She fears the proletariat movement. Caught amid a Marxist rally, she is taunted and forced to shout Communist slogans. Already suspicious of Velutha's boldness, his presence in the rally gives her an accessible object to avenge her insult. The scandal involving her niece Ammu and Velutha and the tragic death of Sophie give her a chance to act as the saviour of the family's honour. She stokes Mammachi's wrath. It is her idea that Ammu should be locked up and Velutha should be banished. She files a false FIR against Velutha and concocts a tale of his insolence, ingratitude, Naxalite affiliations, his molestation of Ammu and kidnapping of the children. Acting as the vulnerable upper-caste woman, she directs the wrath of the upper-caste dominated police machinery against Velutha. When Inspector Matthew comes to know of Velutha's innocence, Baby Kochamma faces the criminal offence of filing a false FIR. To save herself, she convinces the twins that they are Sophie's murderers, and Ammu would be jailed for

their crime. The only way to save Ammu is to shift all the blame to Velutha who would die anyway. She forces them to testify against him. Petrified by Ammu's visit to the police station, she convinces Chacko that Ammu and her children are responsible for his daughter Sophie's death and therefore, Ammu needs to be thrown out of the house and Estha needs to be returned to his father. Years later when the twins return, she is eighty-three, cold and witch-like, laden with make-up and jewellery, and 'living life backwards' all alone in the decaying Ayemenem house. She is afraid that the twins might remember her role in their past. In her greed and her fear of being robbed, she exemplifies the insecurity of the elite in a disparate world.

Pappachi and Mammachi's son Chacko's life mirrors the failed promise of Communism. Sent to Oxford to be educated as a Rhodes Scholar, he ardently admires the Communist stalwart E.M.S. Namboodiripad and the Peoples' revolution. The utopian dreams of his youth are shattered by the fall of the Communist government in Kerala in 1960. Chacko's inefficiency exasperates his overburdened English wife Margaret. He somehow reconciles himself to divorce and to separation from his new-born daughter Sophie. Returning to Kerala, he is pampered by his widowed mother whom he had saved from his father's beatings.

He turns Mammachi's small pickle and jam business into a factory named Paradise Pickles and Preserves. His lack of business acumen leads to huge losses. A self-confessed Anglophile, he lives in a bookish world. He uses lower caste women workers to satisfy his lust. His pompous discussions on Communism are a pretext to flirt with the female 'comrades' of his factory. Though wary of the local politician Comrade Pillai, he underestimates the revolutionary fervour of the times. His awarding of printing contracts to Pillai represents a cunning Capitalist-Communist alliance. He is disturbed by reports of Velutha's Marxist leanings since he is indispensible to the factory. The Naxalite movement is directed against landlords like him, 'with a Marxist mind and feudal libido' and the novelist observes,

> '...the Naxalites...had been known to force men from Good Families to marry servant girls whom they had made pregnant.' (p. 168)

A part of the unjust patriarchy, he rejects his sister Ammu, denying her any right in the property or the factory where she works harder than him. The arrival of his daughter Sophie and ex-wife Margaret from England is the highpoint of his life. Sophie's tragic death leaves him shattered. Instigated by his aunt Baby Kochamma, he turns his raging fury against Ammu and her children. The Communism he has toyed with returns to haunt him.

When there are protests led by Comrade Pillai against Velutha's death, he shuts down his factory and leaves for Canada. Chacko thus becomes the mindless, unhappy agent of an unjust order.

The wily leader of the Communist party in Ayemenem, Comrade Pillai, according to the novelist, was born middle-aged and never had the innocence of childhood. Even his dingy home and middle class family are part of the class war he engineers to gain power. Though he runs Lucky Printing Press ostensibly for printing Marxist literature, he makes money by printing labels for capitalist Chacko's Paradise Pickles. While threatening Chacko with a revolution, he uses his ties with Chacko to impress villagers. In order to win the party ticket from the Kottayam Assembly constituency, in the press where he prints the labels for Paradise Pickles, Pillai urges the workers of the same factory to revolt. The one obstacle in his unprincipled pursuit of power is Velutha, the only untouchable card-holding member of the party, whose presence antagonises the touchable workers. Pillai waits for a chance to eliminate Velutha. A strange mixture of Marxism and religious orthodoxy, Pillai instigates Chacko against Velutha, insisting that the sacredness of the Hindu caste system be respected at all costs. When Velutha seeks his help, he reprimands him with an empty speech on party ideology. Pillai's cryptic statement before the police decides Velutha's fate –

> "Comrade Pillai ...omitted to mention that Velutha was a member of the Communist Party, or that Velutha had knocked on his door late the previous night...Nor, though he knew it to be untrue, did Comrade Pillai attempt to refute the allegation of attempted rape....He merely assured Inspector Thomas Mathew that as far as he was concerned Velutha did not have the protection or patronage of the Communist Party. That he was on his own." (p 262)

The police machinery is now free to unleash its fury against the hapless Paravan. The power-hungry Pillai uses Velutha's death to organize mass protests against Paradise Pickles. But when the factory surrenders without a fight and the issue is soon forgotten, his victory seems meaningless. Still, in the official press version, Pillai emerges as crusader for justice and spokesman of the oppressed, fighting for a slain Communist Paravan.

Old and withered when the twins return, he epitomises the modern Marxist who embraces Western capitalism. He boasts of his son who works for whites. He rejoices in the downfall of the bourgeoisie Ayemenem House. He is one of the many smiling assassins of the polity:

> '...Comrade Pillai didn't hold himself...personally responsible...He dismissed the whole thing as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary

> Politics.....He walked through the world like a chameleon. ...Emerging through chaos unscathed.'(p.14)

Inspector Thomas Matthew of the Kottayam police station exemplifies the police force becoming a mere pawn in the hands of the wealthy and powerful. When Baby Kochamma files a false complaint against Velutha, his upper-caste mind does not think it necessary to give a chance to a Dalit to defend himself. In the village polity where the police act as accuser, judge and saviour, there can be no hope of justice for the poor. However, Inspector Mathew, a Congress party man is well aware of the volatile political situation in Communist Kerala. Worried about reports of Velutha being a suspected Naxalite, he consults with Comrade Pillai in order to confirm that Velutha has no political support. He then dutifully proceeds to punish Velutha for his defiance of the supreme caste laws. The unarmed, innocent man is dramatically surrounded by a fully armed police squad and tortured to death even before being properly arrested or interrogated. However, once Inspector Mathew realises that there is no proof against Velutha and he might be in trouble for a custodial death in those times of workers' revolution, he regrets his hasty action and is quick to shift the blame to Baby Kochamma. He comes to an agreement with her that the only safe way out for them is to make the twins testify against Velutha who would die anyway. He is blissfully unaware of the immense damage he is inflicting with his one question to which Estha is emotionally blackmailed into saying 'yes'. He feels nothing for the horrible death of an innocent man. The defiance of Ammu, who has defiled all the touchables by loving an untouchable, fills him with fury. He satisfies himself by ill-treating her and calling her a prostitute –

> "He knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture...to humiliate and terrorize her, an attempt to instil order into a world gone wrong. ....Inspector Thomas Mathew congratulated himself for the way it had all turned out." (p.260)

Inspector Mathew thus consciously sabotages the very law he is supposed to uphold.

Keralite Communism; the Indian Village; Globalisation

In her novel, Arundhati Roy offers a real slice of the history and politics of Kerala. She juxtaposes regional, national and international events, sketching the era comprehensively. She refers to the 1962 Indo-

China war when the twins are born and the 1965 Indo-Pak war when Ammu leaves her husband. She likens Kerala of the 1960s to Vietnam-

> "Further east, in a small country with similar landscape (jungles, river, rice-fields, communists), enough bombs were being dropped to cover all of it in six inches of steel." (p.35)

Though the novel is set chiefly in the 1960s and 1970s, she summarises the entire history of Kerala by referring to the native rulers, the arrival of Vasco da Gama and Christianity, the Portuguese, Dutch and British regimes, Marxism, the post-independence era and the 1990s.

Arundhati Roy analyses Communism and the theories explaining its success in Kerala. The first theory states that, to the large population of Brahmin converts to Syrian Christianity, Marxism was more akin to Christianity and free from the ambiguities of Hinduism –

> "Replace God with Marx, Satan with the bourgeoisie, Heaven with a classless society, the Church with the Party, and the form and purpose of the journey remained similar." (p. 66)

But Roy points out that most of the Syrian Christians were estate-owning feudal lords for whom Communism meant doom. They had always voted for the Congress party. The second theory claims that spread of literacy created greater awareness among the oppressed and they embraced Communism. Again, Roy clarifies that the high levels of literacy were the outcome of the Communist movement and not the other way round. She logically concludes that the success of Marxism in Kerala was on account of its popular idealistic vision –

> "The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional society. The Marxists worked from *within* the divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to... a cocktail revolution... of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy." (p. 66, 67)

The sad part lay in its duping of everybody including its practitioners.

Such is the popularity of the Marxist experiment that, in 1957, the first democratically elected Communist government in the world, headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, assumes power in Kerala. Yet, governance is different from revolution. The party is unable to give up its archaic ideology or resist the vices accompanying power and translate its social revolution into stable administration. The crisis is resolved by the

declaration of President's Rule in 1960. In 1967, the Communists win a second term. Eager to avoid his past mistakes, E.M.S. finds himself trapped between the mild approach and Chinese backed Naxalism. Also, the nationwide famine and economic crisis of the late 1960s impact Kerala adversely. The soft approach of the E.M.S government angers the Chinese Communist Party –

> "Peking switched its patronage to the newest, most militant faction of the CPI (M) – the Naxalites – who had staged an armed insurrection in Naxalbari... in Bengal. They organized peasants into fighting cadres, seized land, expelled the owners and established People's Courts to try Class Enemies. The Naxalite movement spread across the country and struck terror in every bourgeois heart." (p. 68)

In North Kerala class-based killings begin and landlords are beheaded in Palghat. E.M.S is forced to expel the Naxalites from his party and finely balance, within the parliamentary framework, the assuaging of the angry masses with the appeasement of the elite. Comrades lead rallies all over the state, and in the capital Trivandrum, the charter of the people's demands is presented to E.M.S. himself. As Arundhati Roy puts it,

> "The orchestra petitioning its conductor." (p.69)

The Marxist protest rally filled with angry workers, peasants, students, unemployed and Dalits reflects the class-war:

> "On their shoulders they carried a keg of ancient anger, lit with a recent fuse. There was an edge to this anger that was Naxalite, and new." (p. 69)

The tension is palpable in the encounter of the marchers with the inmates of Ayemenem House in the Plymouth car. The demands of the proletariat reflect the deep inequalities -

> "...that paddy workers, who were made to work...for eleven and a half hours a day...be permitted to take a one-hour lunch break...women's wages be increased from one rupee twenty-five paisa a day, to three rupees, and men's from two rupees fifty paisa to four rupees fifty paisa a day. ...that Untouchables no longer be addressed by their caste names." (p. 69)

Later, at Cochin railway station, when Estha is sent back to his father, the situation remains the same –

> "Grey in the stationlight. Hollow people. Homeless. Hungry. Still touched by last year's famine. Their revolution postponed for the Time Being by Comrade E.M.S.Namboodiripad (*Soviet Stooge, Running Dog*). The former apple of Peking's eye." (p.301)

The reactions of the capitalists are equally suggestive -

> "Cardamom Kings, Coffee Counts and Rubber Barons...came down from...far-flung estates...raised their glasses...sniggered to hide their rising panic." (p. 69)

In the sixties and seventies, development in Kerala is held hostage to Communist - Capitalist conflicts. Poverty and unemployment necessitate large-scale migration to the Gulf or Western countries. The struggle of the emigrants is evident in the scene at Cochin airport. Thus, the real failure of Marxism lies in its betrayal of the very masses it claims to represent –

> "Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature." (p. 287)

Secondly, the novelist uses Ayemenem to represent the Indian village of the 1960s and 1970s. Behind the facade of pastoral innocence exists a complex system operated by politicians, police and landlords who twist the laws to exploit the hapless, ignorant poor and Dalits.

The novel brutally satirises the Kerala police, calling them 'the terror'. Their selfishness, arrogance and cruelty contrasts sharply with boards hanging in police stations –

> " **P** oliteness
> **O** bedience
> **L** oyalty
> **I** ntelligence
> **C** ourtesy
> **E** fficiency" (p. 8)

The torture of innocent Velutha is a severe indictment of the biased police administration.

Arundhati Roy gives voice to the plight of the Dalits through the figure of Velutha. Despite the higher literacy levels, the condition of the Dalits in Kerala remains the same as in other parts of India. Access to education and employment are still 'dreams' for them. There was a time, as Mammachi recalls, when, to keep the Brahmins and Syrian Christians from defiling themselves, the Untouchables had to walk backwards sweeping away their footprints with a broom, and cover their mouths while they spoke. They

could not use public roads, cover their upper bodies or carry umbrellas. Ironically Christianity, which claims to be a casteless, classless religion, assimilates the regional flavour. Change of religion fails to affect thousands of years of psychological conditioning. Even the maidservant Kochu Maria is keen to prove that she is a Touchable Upper Caste Syrian Christian. The upper class loathes parting with power and wealth and the clergy sees an advantage in allying with them. The tragedy of the Dalit Christians is that they are 'non-existent' citizens. When the British came to Malabar, the Paravans and Pelayans had converted to Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability. They were given a few incentives, but had separate churches and priests –

> "...they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire...After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially ,on paper, they were Christians and therefore casteless. It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprints at all." (p. 74)

Deluded even by the Marxists, the Dalits lose in every way.

The novelist boldly handles gender issues. In the rural patriarchal order, women have little freedom. Irrespective of class, caste or religion, the position of a daughter remains the same:

> "...a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a *divorced* daughter...she had no position anywhere...as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject." (p.45, 46)

The life of Mammachi shows how the patriarchy enslaves victimised women so that they continue to perpetuate it. The capitalist Chacko's exploitation of needy women is reminiscent of the relationship between white colonisers and native women. While both Ammu and her British sister-in-law Margaret are divorcees from intercommunity love marriages and fall in love with other men, Margaret, unlike Ammu, lives in a society which neither shuns nor oppresses her. The emancipatory Hindu Code Bill of 1954 has no impact on Ammu's life for she gets neither compensation from her ex-husband nor a share in her family property. Even the Marxist apostle of equality Comrade Pillai treats his wife as a superior servant. The police publicly shave and brand so-called 'prostitutes'. Not much has

changed even in the 1990s when the twins return, for, the Kathakali dancers in Ayemenem temple too beat their wives.

The novelist also presents in her sketch of rural life, the complex history, beauty and decadence of Christianity and Hinduism - two of the great religions that shape the ethos of Kerala. The reciprocal influence of Marxism and religion leads to a mind-boggling brew. The ruling classes use religion as an instrument to power. Religion and politics vitiate each other. Arundhati Roy strongly criticises the complicity of the Church with societal oppression of Dalits and women.

Apart from Communism and rural life in Kerala, the novelist also speaks of the impact of globalisation.The novel opens in the 1990s when the grown-up twins return to Kerala. In this era of socio-economic transition, government policies fail to curb imbalances, to safeguard agriculture or stimulate employment growth, but encourage corporate globalisation. With the end of the Cold War and the fall of Communism, Indian Marxists too make compromises in order to survive. Comrade Pillai's son Lenin works for foreign embassies. Even as his father develops a craze for America, he changes his own name to Levin to hide his Marxist roots. In the suggestively titled chapter – 'God's Own Country', Arundhati Roy delineates Kerala plagued by unhealthy urbanisation. The first casualty is the precious ecosystem. The Meenachal river is reduced to a drain choked with industrial waste, thanks to a dam built in return for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. The second casualty is cultural heritage. Corporates exploit poor natives and market the landscape in glossy tourist brochures. Colonial bungalows and ancestral villas are changed into 'heritage' hotels where rich tourists can play with 'toy' versions of history. The once revered Kathakali performers now face starvation. Desperate, they offer truncated performances for tourists with short-attention spans, and then dance before the gods to ask pardon for commodifying their sacred calling. In the era of Western hegemony, the ruling class facilitates the opportunistic union of Communism and Capitalism. Ayemenem becomes an overpopulated, unplanned town, without order or security.

Finally, *The God of Small Things* also deals with several post-colonial dilemmas. The Ayemenem House is full of generations of Anglophiles. Ammu's father Pappachi, a former official of the Raj, with his three-piece suits, riding boots and Plymouth car, exemplifies colonial cruelty. Her Oxford-educated brother Chacko's marriage to an Englishwoman fails partly because of culture clash. Ammu's husband and father-in-law are products of the Anglo-Indian plantation culture. The exploitative relationship between the white colonisers and the third world is mirrored in

Mr. Hollick, the English tea-estate manager, who forces himself on the native women and finally sets eyes on Ammu. But Pappachi refuses to believe that an Englishman would ever covet another man's wife. The character of Ammu challenges the colonial representation of the average third-world woman as totally ignorant and tradition-bound. In her rebellious attempt to live her life in her own way, she displays the independence ascribed exclusively to the Western woman. While the entire family prostrates before Chacko's English ex-wife and daughter, the sharp retorts of Ammu and her twins, reveal the novelist's anti-racist attitude. Ayemenem House and History House reflect parallel histories of family and nation. Chacko tells the twins that they are a family of Anglophiles,

> "Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away." (p. 52)

He sums up the dilemma of the colonised when he says,

> "...our minds have been invaded by a war...that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war...made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves." (p. 53)

On the other hand stands History House, the colonial-era bungalow of the Black Sahib - the depraved Englishman gone native, in Ayemenem's own heart of darkness.

Outside Ayemenem House, Comrade Pillai's awe of the English language reveals the colonial fixation of the Marxists. At the Cochin airport, the emigrants reflect the pathos of the third world. By the 1990s, neo-colonial capitalism invades Kerala and the result is skewed development, profit-driven industrial and farming practices, ecological disaster and dependence on World Bank loans. Modernisation destroys old ways of life. Foreign exchange from Gulf countries, pumped in by NRIs, deepens the social divide. The trauma of the immigrant is seen in Rahel whose inner agony is reflected in the outer madness of New York. The tragic fate of the downtrodden in both developed and developing worlds is stressed.

A New Idiom for Universal Revolution

The God of Small Things is an artistic masterpiece, touching and humorous, simple and complex at the same time. Its new language and idiom offers a veritable feast for the senses. The story is told in myriad

ways using varied post-modernist techniques. The picture-perfect postcards of the Kerala landscape merge with private lives. Geography and politics, private and public intrigues are intertwined in symbols like Ayemenem House, Paradise Pickles and Preserves, History House and the Meenachal river.

Arundhati Roy places human destiny first in the regional context and then extends it to a universal plane of hegemonic relations. She poetically narrates the history of the subaltern:

> "We're Prisoners of War...Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore...Our lives never important enough. To matter." (p. 53)

The History House where Velutha is assaulted, is testimony of how cruel history can be to the slaves who dare to rebel. Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel are held guilty of breaking convention, the ancient Love Laws –

> 'The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.' (p. 33)

The novel revolves around power struggles and suggests the revolt of the powerless. The caption "Big Man the Laltain versus Small Man the Mombatti" stands for powerful versus weak, elite versus outcastes, state versus citizen, man versus woman, adults versus children.

The universality of the novel, its depiction of the existential crisis and the power of human hatred and love, is its real genius. A cruel fate, a sense of sorrow and of unfulfilled dreams pervades the novel, emphasising the pricelessness of the rare moments of happiness. The symbolism and irony is poignant - Ammu and her twins singing songs of ill-fated love; the twins asking punishments for their little offences, oblivious that their lives would be an unending punishment; destiny leading them to their tragic expedition on the Meenachal; the references to Velutha's inevitable doom. All the characters are victims of power or of fate.

Critical Review

Arundhati Roy offers an interesting analysis of several contemporary regional and national issues and their bearing on individual lives. The human drama in *The God of Small Things* is played out against the extremely volatile backdrop of the sixties and seventies in India - a period of economic crisis, famine and unemployment, peasants' and workers' agitations, Communism and Naxalism, caste conflicts, separatism and

insurgency, of wars with China and Pakistan. The clash between haves and have-nots, touchables and untouchables, orthodoxy and liberalism, especially amid the Marxist mass movements in Kerala, is one of the central motifs. Shyam S. Aggarwala rightly concludes that the novel reveals traces of the Naxal sensibility of the sixties and seventies in India when there was deep anger and ferment among the youth all over the nation. In their fight for social equality and economic justice, they clashed with the established order, its rituals and complacency (Aggarwala 266).

The novel captures the essence of the successes and failures of the great democratic Communist experiment in the southern state of Kerala, the only state in India apart from West Bengal to experience this phenomenon. The novelist appreciates the progressive political activism that helped Kerala to achieve land reforms, universal literacy, better caste and gender equity, while strongly condemning the casteist, orthodox and patriarchal brand of politics, the rigid leftist ideologies, mob mentality, trade unionism, *hartals* and culture of political violence that keep Kerala comparatively underdeveloped. Similar views are echoed by renowned political scholars such as Jitendra Singh, Victor Fic, Duncan Forester, Robert L. Hardgrave, Christopher May, Ramakrishnan Nair, V.K.S.Nayar, A.V.Jose, T.K.Ooomen and T.J.Nossiter. They acknowledge the lasting contribution of the Communist movement in Kerala towards the politicisation and mobilisation of the underprivileged, but also point out that it was mostly regional and casteist, not truly international (Rao 3,9,10).

Arundhati Roy's description of the Communist regime in Kerala attains credibility as she is able to highlight its self-contradictory nature. According to Marx and Engels, the aim of the Communists is to enable the proletariat to overthrow the bourgeoisie controlled state and acquire political power (Rao 20). Communism in Kerala appears self-contradictory because it eventually compromised more with the conventional framework of society and state rather than challenging it. This is made amply evident by Roy in her references to the opportunistic brand of Communism practised by Chief Minister Namboodiripad in Trivandrum and by Comrade Pillai in Ayemenem. Elsewhere, Arundhati Roy states, "If you look at the communist parties, most of their leaders are from the upper castes. When they fight elections, candidates are carefully chosen to represent the dominant caste of their respective 'vote bank' – an example of how communism will harness the traditional caste system in its quest for power in a 'representative' democracy" (*The Shape of the Beast* 31). Hypocritical Communist politicians like Comrade Pillai who betray the faith of the poor and downtrodden like Velutha and exploit them to

acquire power, prove the decadence of the Communist ideology. To quote Prof.B.Parvathi, "...the novel must have been in the making for a couple of years, absorbing the changes around the world and at home - the fall of the USSR in 1991 and the growing disapproval of the practices of communists at home, loss of fervour and commitment to ideology and growth of extreme selfishness...Arundhati Roy thus pictures the agents of an ideology and the sub human tendencies of the agents which become a statement of disappointment and disillusionment. In addition to caste and class, communism also turns into another form of oppression in the novel...it is a vehement critique of the bending of ideology for petty personal considerations...." (Parvathi B. 163-171). Thus, the novelist emphasises that the success of any ideology depends on the ethics of its practitioners.

The novel pictures the abuses of power in the contemporary law and order machinery. The fate of Velutha in police custody exemplifies the position accorded to the poor and oppressed castes by the custodians of the law. As Prof. S.P. Srivastava observes, the police, prisons and state are the main culprits in violation of human rights in India (qtd. in Bawa xi, xii).

Caste and gender discrimination are the fulcrums on which the novel turns. These two crucial national issues are covered in the very real picture of a representative Indian village - Ayemenem. Its bitter realities suggest the bleak national situation. R. Krishnakumar, through his interviews with locals, proves that Roy accurately reflects Ayemenem area in Kottayam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most of the socio-cultural, political and geographical details are precise and most characters are based on real figures (Krishnakumar R. 109-111).

As far as caste discrimination is concerned, the fate of Arundhati Roy's untouchable protagonist Velutha was and is shared by countless Dalits in India. Untouchability is one of the world's most rigid systems of exclusion. In 1949, Dr. Ambedkar stated, "...we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality.....putting our political democracy in peril" (qtd. in Jayal 24). India's leading anthropologist M.N Srinivas had observed in 1957 itself, that the power and activity of caste had only increased everywhere (Guha 605-606). Arundhati Roy herself describes the Hindu caste-system as, "....this layered, horizontally divided society with no vertical bolts....no human-*humane*- interaction that holds the layers together...the bottom half of society simply shears off and falls away...silently" (*The Shape of the Beast* 2). Regarding the presentation of the caste-system in the novel, John Updike writes, "Treading Roy's maze, we learn a great deal about India.....Occidental readers who imagined that

untouchability was banished by Mahatma Gandhi will find the caste onus cruelly operative in 1969..." (Updike 156, 158).

All the same, Velutha's character signals an inner awakening among suppressed Dalits. Arundhati Roy admitted in an interview that, in the dignified character of Velutha with his deep convictions, she saw a hope for liberation (Roy, *Frontline* 107). Paul Elwork opines, "Velutha's defiance and courage....constitute hope...he will not accept his imposed role, no matter how many ages of tradition stand beyond it" (Elwork 187). It is interesting to note that, in the late 1960s and early 1970s during which the novel is set, there was a remarkable explosion of Dalit movements and Dalit literature all over India. Ironically, in 1997, when Roy's novel was published, Praful Bidwai observed in his column in the *Frontline*: " There is a tremendous ferment among Dalit youth ...crimes against Dalits and Adivasis increased by as much as 89 per cent between 1992 and 1994.....Dalits have apparently lost confidence in the administration and in traditional methods of conciliation....refuse to work on low wages for upper caste landlords, and demand apologies for insults heaped on them....this is the emergence of a pan-Indian Dalit consciousness....the rise of second-generation Dalit intellectuals...it could open the way to social emancipation and a radical restructuring of Indian politics" (Bidwai 98,99).

As regards gender discrimination, Arundhati Roy's heroine Ammu epitomises the modern, educated, independent, rebellious feminine. Ammu, who is both tender mother and reckless lover undermines what Simone de Beauvoir calls 'the myth of the eternal feminine', which defines woman as either saint or sinner, without intermediate possibilities. Ammu raises questions as to whether there is for a woman in traditional society, life after divorce, after a love marriage or the failure of it. It is worth noting that Arundhati Roy's mother Mary, also a divorcee from an inter-community love marriage like Ammu, challenged the discriminatory Syrian Christian inheritance law in the Supreme Court in 1986 and won equal rights for women. As Jacob George C. surmises, Arundhati Roy contributes to the tradition of dealing with socio-political issues from an exclusively female vantage point (George 16).

The nature of contemporary religion and culture figures prominently in the novel. Roy condemns both the dehumanised casteist version of Hinduism, and the hypocritical version of Indian Christianity which adheres to the caste-system. As she says elsewhere, "...Kerala is a complex society because it is progressive and parochial simultaneously. Even among the Syrian Christians - who are the oldest...Christians in India - you have caste issues" (*The Shape of the Beast* 31). William Darlymple writes about Christianity in Kerala, "Christianity has deep roots in the soil,

stretching back...to the first century AD...the Hindus and the Christians...have found...their rituals fusing slowly together...As it was specifically the Kerala Brahmins that St. Thomas converted, the Christians here have always maintained a high social status in the complex caste hierarchy of southern India" (Darlymple 22).

Finally, in its take on issues of globalisation and post-colonialism, *The God of Small Things* is a strikingly modern novel. Its narration of the sufferings of Dalits, women and children, of the victims of corporate capitalism, offers a vital corrective to elitist versions of national history. Roy's anti-big dam stance is evident in her description of the ecological crisis caused by a dam on the Meenachal river. According to M. Dasan, the novelist projects a nineties sensibility onto the Kerala of the sixties. The questions raised about Kerala's politics, society, economy, environment, caste and gender issues, were discussed much more in the nineties than in the sixties and seventies. Neither neutral nor deliberately anti-communist, Roy looks retrospectively at the lapses of Communism and demands a serious re-evaluation of the developmental paradigms of Kerala during the past few decades (Dasan M. 22-36). The novel forcefully shows the continuing impact of erstwhile colonial power centres on the third world. Subhadra Bhaskaran writes, "The novel brings out vividly the ex-colonial society's inability to make a complete break from its colonial past and fight against the forces of imperialism persisting in the contemporary times" (Bhaskaran 108). According to Lata Marina Varghese, Arundhati Roy dismantles the imperial centre by seizing its language and replacing it with a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place, and secondly, by privileging the marginalised and moving them from periphery to centre (Varghese 12-21).

Of Power and Powerlessness

Arundhati Roy views society and state as repressive institutions that terrorise the 'insignificant' commoner with brute force. She captures insightfully the role of the major players in the regional polity – the elite of Kerala society (upper caste, landlords, patriarchy and Church) represented by Baby Kochamma, the political parties represented by Comrade Pillai, and the Kerala police or government represented by Inspector Mathew. These three elements that operate the system throw their weight against the subaltern citizen, against Velutha - the poor or Dalit man, Ammu- the oppressed woman, and Estha and Rahel - the vulnerable children. Roy depicts a system which destroys men and seeks profit in their deaths. For

instance, the conversation between Comrade Pillai and Inspector Mathew, before orders are given for Velutha's arrest is described thus:

> "The two men had a conversation. Brief, cryptic, to the point...they didn't trust each other. But they understood each other perfectly...Both in their own way truly, terrifyingly adult. They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. They worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine." (p.262)

Power politics becomes the crux of Arundhati Roy's rendering of personal and national destinies in *The God of Small Things*. As she states elsewhere, "The theme of much of what I write...is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in...I believe that the accumulation of vast unfettered power by a state or a country, a corporation or an institution - or even an individual ...regardless of ideology, results in excesses..." (Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* 12, 13). According to M.K.Naik the novel, "posits an antimony between two entities: one is small, vulnerable.....cut out to be a victim.....the other is large, armed with seemingly unlimited power...the inevitable victor, who crushes its victim. The 'Small' is obviously the Individual, and the 'Big'...either Religion, or Society, or Tradition, or Destiny... While each of these is capable of crushing the Individual, they often combine to make the demolition more than complete (Naik 67).

Nevertheless, Arundhati Roy projects the dissent and rebellion of the subaltern against formidable structures. In the union of Ammu and Velutha or the incest of Estha and Rahel, Roy wishes to explore individual autonomy and the possibility of asserting or constructing 'identity' in a rigidly stratified society" (Amin 28). Roy exalts Ammu and Velutha as the small gods who would defy tradition and sacrifice themselves with a smile. Theirs is the inspiring spiritual triumph of humanity against omnipotent forces. Binayak Roy writes, "The novel ends with the picture of the lovers imparadised in each other's arms and with 'Tomorrow' as the last word. It, therefore, tends to mitigate, if not negate, the lovers' fate as victims by projecting them as two self-realised human beings with their felicity unspoilt. The novelist packs all her iconoclasm into the novel's title by privileging her "Small God" over society's "Big God" and above all by making a god of a subversive lover" (B. Roy 123).

3.3. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006)

Daughter of renowned Indian English fiction writer Anita Desai, Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971. Brought up and educated in India, England and the US, she resides in the States. Her acclaimed first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) won the Betty Trask Award. She became the youngest woman to win the Man Booker Prize for her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). The novel also won the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award.

The Inheritance of Loss opens in February 1986 in Kalimpong in Darjeeling district situated at the northernmost tip of West Bengal. In this sensitive region in the north-eastern Himalayas, bordering the countries of Sikkim, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan, the movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland is at its peak. The tale revolves around a retired Anglicised Gujarati judge Jemubhai Patel, his teenaged grand-daughter Sai Mistry, their old cook from Uttar Pradesh - Panna Lal, his son Biju who struggles to earn a living as cook in New York's restaurants, and Sai's young lower class Nepali tutor and lover Gyan. 'Cho Oyu', the crumbling mansion of the judge, wrapped in the freezing mist and isolation at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga, symbolises decadence and loss. National politics comes calling when the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) rebels storm into Cho Oyu. The lives of all the protagonists are overshadowed by the GNLF agitation that feeds on the wretchedness of thousands of Nepali Gorkhas who feel cheated by the Indian state and direct their anger at the non-Nepalis in the region. This novel with its action shifting between India and America captures the intermingling of the personal and the national amid ethnic conflicts and class divides. Suketu Mehta opines that Kiran Desai tells "...the gripping stories of people buffeted by winds of history, personal and political" (qtd. in Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* "praise for the book"). According to the *New York Times*, the novel "...manages to explore with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue: globalization, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence. Despite being set in the mid-1980s, it seems the best kind of post-9/11 novel" (qtd. in Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* blurb).

The Indian Dilemma: From Kalimpong to New York

The young lovers Sai and Gyan, the Judge and the Cook, and their neighbours constitute the action set in Kalimpong, India. Sai, the beautiful seventeen-year old is always haunted by loss. Her father had been a scientist in the optimistic Nehruvian era. In the 1970s, her parents had

emigrated to Russia for the Indo-USSR space program, leaving Sai in a convent boarding school in Darjeeling. After their death in a road accident, six-year old Sai is sent to the Judge, her stone-hearted maternal grandfather at Cho Oyu. She is brought up by the kind Cook and shares a deep bond with him. In the harsh Himalayan clime, in a dilapidated mansion, this

> 'orphan child of India's failing romance with the Soviets' (p.42),

bravely nurtures dreams of exploring the world, but knows her limitations. An Anglicised girl of Gujarati and Parsi parentage growing up in north-east India, she finds herself in the queer position of both outsider and insider amid separatist ethnic conflicts. Even as the region seeks its own identity in the Free Tibet and Separate Gorkhaland movements, Sai struggles to decipher her own destiny which would soon be guided by political forces.

Vulnerable and desperate to escape Cho Oyu, Sai puts aside class and racial inhibitions to surrender to her Nepali maths tutor Gyan's passionate courtship. She is blissfully ignorant of the steadily brewing Gorkha insurgency and the deepening Nepali versus Non-Nepali divide. Her first real confrontation with regional politics takes place when the GNLF youth ransack Cho Oyu and humiliate its inmates. Unaware of the GNLF's influence on Gyan, Sai is shattered by his hateful accusation that upper class non-Nepalis like her have exploited and oppressed his poor Nepali Gorkha community. Even as Gyan deserts her for no fault of hers, Kalimpong moves swiftly towards civil war. GNLF men and the police join hands to deport Sai's beloved friend, old Father Booty. She rages at Gyan and his people for destroying the peace of her beloved mountains, and tearing apart her small, affectionate circle of friends. Her anger, like Gyan's, is misdirected, for they are all victims of circumstances. Pining for Gyan, she reaches his house in Bong Busti and is shocked by the poverty but ends up having a bitter argument with him. After the burning of the Indo-Nepal treaty, the region descends into anarchy. Sai bravely ventures out to buy essentials in the deserted streets infested with police and militants. The pathos deepens when the Judge's dog Mutt is stolen and he vents his raging grief upon the Cook. Crushed by grief at the loss of everything precious to her, Sai desperately tries to retain hope. Her empathy for fellow sufferers comes to the fore. She musters new resolve and strength. Even as the miraculous reunion of the Cook and his son Biju rejuvenates her, the shining peaks of the Kanchenjunga inspire her to move forward –

> "There was grace in forgetting and giving up ... everyone had to accept imperfection and loss in life." **(**p. 252)

Sai's lover, twenty-one year old Gyan, represents the backward Gorkha community of West Bengal. Belonging to a poor Nepali family of the Bong Busti slum in Kalimpong, Gyan is a graduate. His ancestors had been brought by the British from Nepal to the north-eastern tea plantations as bonded labour. Later they became army recruits. After independence, Gyan's father had taken to teaching. Gyan is frustrated by his inability to support his family which has sacrificed all to educate him. The job of taking maths tuitions for Sai at Cho Oyu comes as a relief. Taken up by Sai's beauty and upper-class life, Gyan falls for her.

However, Gyan is caught up in a GNLF rally and listens to stirring speeches of Gorkha leaders decrying the systematic exploitation of the Gorkhas by both British and Indian rulers. They had shed their blood to defend the country but were given neither power nor socio-economic benefits. Enraged, Gyan identifies with the demand for a separate Gorkhaland-

> "As he floated through the market, Gyan had a feeling of history being wrought, its wheels churning under him,....did their hearts rise and fall to something true?....did they see themselves from a perspective beyond this moment...?.....Gyan remembered the stirring stories of when citizens had risen up in their millions and demanded that the British leave....if a nation had such a climax in its history, its heart, would it not hunger for it again?" (p.157, 158)

He directs his anger at Sai, an easy target. He feels like a martyr in rejecting her, since she represents the non-Nepali upper-class that has denied justice to his people. Sai's visit to his house destroys the sham pretence behind his polished appearance. Even as Sai accuses him of victimising innocents and the Gorkha movement spirals into uncontrolled violence, Gyan finds his courage failing. He is secretly glad when his elders berate him for getting involved with the GNLF. He regrets his cruelty to Sai and his careless talk that had resulted in the robbery at Cho Oyu. He promises the Cook that he would bring the lost dog Mutt back to Sai. For all his fickle-mindedness and immaturity, Gyan symbolises thousands of poor youth led astray by insurgency and the longing of victims of regional politics for peace.

Sai's grandfather, the retired sixty-seven year old Judge Jemubhai Patel, epitomizes the degeneration produced by colonialism. He is born to a poor rural family in Kutch, Gujarat. His ambitious father sends him to study in England. Jemubhai ends up as magistrate in British India. He is a tormented soul –

> "He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both." (p.119)

Seeking solace in his empty pomp as an officer of the Raj, he is cruel to his wife. He banishes her for attending a public meeting of Nehru. He disowns his newborn daughter and remains unmoved when his wife dies. He withdraws into retirement in a Scotsman's decaying mansion in the remote Himalayas. Lonely and ill-tempered, he remains cold to his own grand-daughter Sai and to his loyal Cook. Trying to forget his own poor finances by sticking to a colonial lifestyle, he ignores the deep class and racial divides and the Gorkhaland movement rocking Kalimpong. But he is shaken when the GNLF youth barge into his home, insult him and carry away his rifles. He is crushed when his beloved dog Mutt is stolen by the poor whose pleas he had rejected. The regional crisis finally awakens the humanity of the Judge. He grieves ceaselessly for Mutt. He is ridiculed by the locals who force him to see the bitter reality of the times when even human lives have no value. He is filled with guilt as he remembers his past cruelties. He takes to hard drinking and beats the cook, accusing him of neglecting Mutt. His bitterness is ironically justified by the bleak times -

> "He couldn't conceive of punishment great enough for humanity. A man wasn't equal to an animal, not one particle of him....The world had failed Mutt. It had failed beauty; it had failed grace...The judge had lost his clout. . . . he had gone to England and joined the ICS; ....but now that position of power was gone, frittered away in years of misanthropy and cynicism." (p. 292)

The Cook Panna Lal, hailing from a backward village in Uttar Pradesh, joins the retinue of the Judge as a young boy. When the Judge settles down at Kalimpong he accompanies him. A faithful servant who affectionately brings up Sai, he is relegated to the miserable servant quarters of Cho Oyu. Having endured poverty all his life, he centres his hopes on his only child Biju, whom he has brought up all alone after the death of his wife. After much toil, he sends Biju to the US to work as a cook. He survives on the comforting letters of his son, unaware of his sufferings as an illegal immigrant. He boasts of his son to the whole town and promises help to the aspiring sons of other servants. A nameless universal figure who represents the master-servant divide and the desperation of the poor, he becomes a victim of the Gorkhaland movement. Terrorised by the GNLF rebels who storm into Cho Oyu, he is humiliated by the police who suspect him of helping the rebels and rummage through his possessions. When the GNLF politicians demand compulsory attendance at the burning of the Indo-Nepal

treaty, the Judge sends him to attend the rally which turns violent. Battered and beaten, he escapes narrowly. Emotionally scarred, he feels like an intruder in the land he had loved for so long. When curfew is imposed, he despairs that he will never meet his son Biju. When Mutt is lost and the Judge turns his wrath upon him, he is filled with grief and self-reproach. Yet, his affection triumphs when Biju returns. He epitomises ignorant masses tossed around by political forces. When he grovels before the GNLF men, the novelist observes,

> " 'Please living only to see my son please don't kill me please *I'm a poor man spare me.'* His lines had been honed over centuries, passed down through generations, for poor people needed certain lines; the script was always the same, and they had no option but to beg for mercy." (p.6)

The lives of the neighbours of Cho Oyu, friends of the Judge and Sai, mirror the trauma of the educated middle class non-Nepali populace which is targeted by the Gorkha Liberation Army. The Bengali sisters Lola and Noni, who are close friends of Sai, become a classic example of the persecution of the Bengali population by the separatists. Lolita, an Anglicised widow, inherits the picturesque property of Mon Ami built by her nature-loving husband. Suspicious and contemptuous of the Nepalis, she is proud of her daughter Pixie, a newsreader with the BBC. Nonita, a spinster stifled by circumstances, and more compassionate to the poor Nepalis, has been Sai's tutor since childhood. While Lola lambasts the Gorkhas for blackmailing the government and trying to divide an already fragmented India, Noni is sympathetic to their cause. They watch in horror as the peace of Kalimpong is destroyed. The GNLF youth mistake their heirlooms, British provisions and carefully budgeted existence for enormous wealth. They loot and occupy the house, mocking the terrified sisters. With the town blockaded, Lola and Noni fear starvation. Despite their protests, rows of huts are erected overnight by poor Gorkhas on Mon Ami. When Lola pleads before Pradhan, the flamboyant leader of the GNLF mafia, he demands her estate and asks her to join his harem. Humiliated, she returns home sobbing and curses her dead husband for burdening her with safeguarding another 'inheritance of loss' - Mon Ami. When the sisters venture out for essentials during breaks in the curfew, they are ostracised for being Bengalis. With their dreams of peaceful retirement in the Himalayas shattered, they exemplify the travails of women who suffer most during political turmoil, as also of those who are exiled in their own country.

Father Booty and Uncle Potty - the two old neighbours and dear friends of Sai, are innocent victims of the GNLF insurgency. Father Booty, a

Swiss missionary, genuinely helps the poor. Gentle and lovable, he sets up a dairy farm. He helps local farmers and artisans to market their products. He is an eyesore for the self-seeking bureaucracy and power-hungry rebels. They get an opportunity when he photographs a butterfly near a strategic Indo-Chinese border post. His camera is confiscated and he is accused of endangering national security. After a lifetime spent in serving India, he is labelled as an illegal resident and deported to Switzerland for failing to renew his visa. Both he and his friends are devastated when he leaves his beloved mountains. It is obvious that the Gorkhas would confiscate all his property and cattle left in the care of his drunken friend Uncle Potty. The fate of Father Booty epitomises the destruction of constructive forces amid separatist power-politics. As Sai muses,

> "This is what... people were doing in the name of decency and education, in the name of hospitals for Nepalis and management positions. In the end, Father Booty...who...had done much more for development in the hills than any of the locals, and without screaming or waving kukris...was to be sacrificed." (p.223)

A considerable part of the action in the novel takes place outside India. The Cook's young son Biju and his fellow Indians comprise the other thread of the plot relating to New York, USA. Biju embodies the plight of the have-nots during the economic crisis of the 1980s. He is expected to save his family by working as a cook in America. After being duped often and after bribing many, Biju and his father reach the US embassy in New Delhi. While waiting for his visa, Biju witnesses the abject humiliation Indians willingly suffer to escape the scourge of poverty. He cannot believe his luck when his fake answers get him a fifteen day visa for New York. Arriving with a million hopes, he soon finds that life is hell for illegal immigrants shunned by well-settled Indians and harassed by employers and government officials. Biju's stay in poor Negro neighbourhoods hiding from the law, the bitter cold and stifling heat, the hellish workplaces – all these epitomise not only the destiny of a sizeable population of Indians but also the hidden squalor of America's underbelly. Closeted among men of every race and religion, he finds that Indians inhabit every nook of the globe and that the India-Pakistan enemity continues even in the first world which treats every third world immigrant alike. His comic African friend Saeed-Saeed, who changes chameleon-like to win the fierce race for the priceless Green Card, mirrors the struggle of the immigrants. Torn between working in restaurants serving beef and his Hindu faith, Biju finally finds work in a vegetarian Gujarati cafe. But the exploitation by the greedy owners is unbearable and Biju is given no medical aid even after a nasty

fall. The news of the violence in Kalimpong makes him fear for his old father. Gathering all his hard-earned dollars he escapes to India, only to be looted of everything including his clothes and shoes by GNLF militants. He is relieved to see his father alive at Cho Oyu. His journey away from and back to his motherland becomes the journey of every citizen plagued by national woes yet bound by unbreakable bonds to his nation.

North-Eastern Regionalism; Economic Crisis; Colonial Legacies

In her novel, Kiran Desai offers a whirlwind tour of north-east India, nestling in the Himalayan ranges. She recounts the ancient romance of the region - thick forests, exquisite *gompas* or Buddhist monasteries dangling amid unreachable peaks, *dzongs* or royal castles, and precious commodities traded along the Silk Route. Hill-stations like Kalimpong and Darjeeling offer a fascinating combination of geography and history. The army and Christian missionaries are major regional players. There are old settlers and erstwhile royalty, the inheritors of loss, struggling to maintain colonial lifestyles. The rich confluence of races and cultures leads to tensions as well. Desai also documents the backwardness of the region, absence of basic infrastructure and inefficient, corrupt police and bureaucracy. Indiscriminate westernisation mars the pristine landscape and culture. Frustrated unemployed youth are forced to take up arms or emigrate. There is misuse of privileges among army cadre. The Cook is part of a long chain involved in the illegal sale of army supplies. The international politics of the 1960s to 1980s is also reflected. After the 1962 Indo-China war, India cosies up to Russia. But with the fall of USSR, China is seen as a threat for the entire region.

Between harsh climatic conditions and continuous strife, the north-east has little scope for progress. The newspaper reports read by Sai show that while the rest of India gradually moves forward, the North-East remains mired in dissatisfaction and armed insurgency stemming from delicate geo-politics and faulty colonial and post-independence policies. As regards the separatist Gorkha movement, Kiran Desai observes,

> "It was the Indian-Nepalese this time, fed up with being treated like the minority ....where they were the majority. They wanted their own country...Here, where India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim, and the army did pull-ups and push-ups, maintaining their tanks with khaki paint in case the Chinese grew hungry for more territory than Tibet, it had always been a messy map...A great amount of warring, betraying, bartering had

> occurred; between Nepal, England, Tibet, India, Sikkim, Bhutan; Darjeeling stolen from here, Kalimpong plucked from there ..." (p.9)

Naturally, here there is a general feeling of disillusionment about India, which is reflected in Lola's advice to her daughter:

> "Better leave sooner rather than later... India is a sinking ship...*the doors won't stay open forever*..." (p.47)

There is a scramble to find employment abroad. The NRIs who dissuade Biju from returning to India, see India as a closed economy, a land of disparity and bloodshed, without a future.

The Inheritance of Loss objectively analyses regionalism in north-eastern India, especially the eighties movement for Gorkhaland. The brave, loyal and hardy Gorkhas, brought from Nepal as bonded labour and soldiers, had endured exploitation both under Britishers and in free India. Shunned by non-Nepalis, they had been denied economic, social and political rights. This injustice had been exploited by anti-state radicals, culminating in the demand for a separate state for Gorkhas led by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF).

Kiran Desai explores various aspects of the Gorkhaland movement. One is the propensity of the north-eastern region to get embroiled in ethnic conflicts stemming from the complicated history of India. The British divided the region for administrative convenience. The partition of Bengal in 1947 and the merger of varied tribal regions into independent India had its own repercussions. The convention of dividing India into states based on linguistic and cultural differences, is termed as "madness" by Sai's neighbour Lola. She fumes,

> "This state-making...biggest mistake that fool Nehru made. Under his rules any group of idiots can stand up demanding a new state and get it, too... From fifteen we went to sixteen, sixteen to seventeen, seventeen to twenty-two...." (p.128)

The general situation in India is again summed up by Lola,

> "...statehood demands. Separatist movement here, separatist movement there, terrorists, guerrillas, insurgents, rebels, agitators, instigators, and they all learn from one another, of course – the Neps have been encouraged by the Sikhs and their Khalistan, by ULFA, NEFA, TLA; Jharkhand, Bodoland, Gorkhaland; Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Kashmir, Punjab, Assam...." (p.128-129)

Secondly, geo-politics plays mischief in the north-east. The Gorkha dominated region at the Northern tip of West Bengal lies near the porous borders of the Maoism infested monarchy of Nepal, the dictatorship in Burma, the region of Tibet annexed by China, the monarchy of Bhutan and the region of Sikkim annexed by India. Darjeeling had been taken from Sikkim and Kalimpong from Bhutan and added to West Bengal. The original inhabitants of the region are the disappearing neglected tribe of Lepchas. Refugees and illegal immigrants pour in from the neighbouring areas. Cultural differences and economic crisis fuel regionalism. The Nepali population of the region angered at being driven out of Assam, Meghalaya and Bhutan and denied equal status with other Indian citizens, demands a separate state comprising the subdivisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kurseong, extending to the foothills, parts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts, from Bengal into Assam.

When the GNLF agitation for Gorkhaland, with its epicentres in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, starts in 1985, it is viewed as a student protest. But soon it affects every section of society. Its slogans painted on government establishments read-

> "We are stateless", "It is better to die than live as slaves", "We are constitutionally tortured. Return our land from Bengal", "LIBERATION!". (p.126)

Kiran Desai comments:

> "...one day fifty boys, members of the youth wing of the GNLF, gathered to swear an oath at Mahakaldara to fight to the death for the formation of a homeland, Gorkhaland. Then they marched down the streets of Darjeeling... 'Gorkhaland for Gorkhas. We are the liberation army.' They were watched....as they waved their unsheathed kukris, sliced the fierce blades through the tender mist under the watery sun. Quite suddenly, everyone was using the word *insurgency*." (p.126)

The pain of centuries of oppression and betrayal crystallises into uncontrollable fury as the GNLF leaders make rousing speeches. They recount how the demands of almost all sections of Indian society, except the Nepalis, were met in 1947. The demand of the Communist party of India for a separate Gorkhastan was ignored. Nepali Gorkhas were used as labourers and loyal soldiers for centuries and fought even against their own kinsmen for the British, Indian and Pakistani armies, yet were rewarded with humiliation. In the region where they constituted eighty percent of the population, they were never allowed to become government servants or

doctors or estate owners. Their language was never taught in schools. The GNLF promises to end all this, by setting up a Gorkha government –

> "In our own country, the country we fight for, we are treated like slaves. Every day the lorries leave bearing away our forests, sold by foreigners to fill the pockets of foreigners. Every day our stones are carried from the riverbed of the Teesta to build their houses and cities. We are labourers working barefoot in all weather, thin as sticks, as they sit fat in managers' houses with their fat wives, with their fat bank accounts and their fat children going abroad. ...We will provide jobs for our sons. We will give dignity to our daughters....we will defend our own homeland...we will run our own affairs in our own language. ...we will wash our bloody kukris in the mother waters of the Teesta. Jai Gorkha." (p.159-160)

A full-scale class war between the Gorkhas and the non-Nepali middle class is orchestrated by rebels and government agents. The chief reason for the insurgency is the deep class divide. Penniless Gorkhas who are mostly employed as servants rob their heartless, rich masters and cross the porous border to Nepal. More than racial divide, class conflict pits Sai against Gyan. Bong Busti slum and the plight of the Lepcha drunkard blinded by the police point to the shameful poverty of the region. The poor Nepalis are exploited and despised as dullards.

GNLF activists publicly write posters in blood demanding Gorkhaland. Unfortunately, innocent citizens are targeted to blackmail the impenetrable state. The GNLF army of misguided and frustrated youth take to extremism. The civil war intensifies with the Ghoom program of action. Blockades, strikes, food shortages, boycott of national days and elections follow. Tourism suffers and all businesses and educational institutions are shut down. The few genuine missionaries and NGOs working for the uplift of the region are driven away. The ill-equipped Indian army enforces draconian measures, jungle raj prevails and private property is usurped. Ironically, bureaucrats, police and army harass commoners. Self-seeking GNLF leaders challenge the idea of one India. Encouraged by government incompetence, they write to world leaders complaining of repression and genocide. Desai refers to Subhash Ghising and Pradhan, the GNLF leaders. Pradhan struts about as the raja of Kalimpong, with a harem full of young girls, even as once powerful non-Nepalis grovel before him. If Pradhan is fiery, Ghising, the leader of the Darjeeling wing, is a diplomat and better politician.

The movement climaxes when the 1950 Indo-Nepal treaty is burnt on 27 July 1986 in a massive GNLF rally. Rebels terrorise unwilling locals into joining the rally which turns violent. Innocent civilians and policemen are killed or injured, while the miscreants escape. Indians turn against

Indians in the Mela Ground where Gandhiji's statue had been erected to mark independence, at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga - symbol of peace and beauty:

> "In a fast-forward blur thirteen local boys were dead. This was how history moved, the slow build, the quick burn, and in an incoherence, the leaping both backward and forward, swallowing the young into old hate. The space between life and death, in the end, too small to measure.....the heads of policemen came up on stakes....A beheaded body ran briefly down the street, blood fountaining from the neck ..." (p.276, 277)

Martial law is imposed. Government establishments are burnt, roads and bridges are destroyed, and crime rates soar. While the police try to hunt them down, GNLF youth have the time of their lives. Reports come in from neighbouring countries of ex-army men training rebels. Mutilated corpses and half-dead men line the streets. People slowly grow apathetic –

> "There they were ...caught up in the mythic battles of past vs. present, justice vs. injustice – the most ordinary swept up in extraordinary hatred, because extraordinary hatred was, after all, a commonplace event. (p.295)

Status quo continues till Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's accord with the GNLF. The setting up of an autonomous Hill Council to govern the Gorkha region restores normalcy. On 2 October 1988 (Gandhiji's birth anniversary), thousands of GNLF men surrender along with huge piles of ammunition.

Above all, *The Inheritance of Loss* is the quintessential post-colonial novel. Desai herself being an Indian immigrant in the States, understands the diaspora well. In the novel, both the Judge-the old emigrant and Biju-the new emigrant, suffer from the dehumanising post-colonial dilemma with all its rootlessness, alienation and complexes.

The Judge, entrenched in the colonial discourse, is unable to accept the realities of free India. The painful racism he experiences in England leads to aversion for India. Battered by the Gorkha movement in his old age, the false edifice of his life crumbles. The Judge's fellow-bureaucrat Bose laments that the British had abandoned them in 1947,

> "...leaving behind only those ridiculous Indians who couldn't rid themselves of what they had broken their souls to learn." (p.205)

The colonial impact is seen in all the characters. Even the Cook dreams of working for a white sahib. Sai grows up as a westerner with little connection to the native culture. Gyan, aspiring to be the westerner he can never become, reminds the Judge of his own past. Lola and Noni blindly

adore the English, refusing to acknowledge postcolonial issues until it is too late. The regionalism in the north-east is traced to the messy divisions of the subcontinent by the colonisers. The Gorkhas have been exploited as tea workers, coolies and soldiers by the British. The colonial legacy divides elite like Sai from ordinary Nepalis like Gyan.

Biju's stay in New York chronicles the struggle of poor third world immigrants. The economic crisis of the 1980s leads millions to queuing up before Western embassies, cringing in their black skin and adoring the white-skinned officers who would decide their destiny. Illegal immigrants are dismissed after extracting cheap labour and lead a fugitive life. Many cannot escape and for those who do, it is too late to salvage a lost lifetime. Desai observes,

> "It was horrible what happened to Indians abroad and nobody knew but other Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret." (p.138)

And again,

> "But it *WAS* so hard...*YET* there were so many here...Millions risked death, were humiliated, hated, lost their families - YET there were so many here." (p.189)

The ugly foundations of the glittering first world are laid bare. Desai reveals the struggles of poor Americans and the invisible slums created in American cities as people from the world over race for the American dream. For people like Biju and his Muslim friend Saeed- a master conman who repeatedly dupes the American government, religious identity is the anchor in the American whirlpool. Biju's fellow cook Achootan tells racist Britishers,

> "Your father came to *my* country and took *my* bread and now I have come to *your* country to get my bread back." (p.135)

But average white Americans like Odessa and Baz seem blissfully unaware of American imperialism- interference in regional politics, impoverishing developing countries through dirty deals and manipulating the World Bank, UN and IMF. American businessmen are convinced that Asia is the next huge market. Wealthy Gujarati NRIs compete with each other, reduced to profit-making machines, ignorant of their true identities. Biju realises that he is living in a place where both life and death are fake. Yet fellow NRIs remind him,

> "...America is in the process of buying up the world....Still a world, my friend, where one side travels to be a servant, and the other side travels to be treated like a king. You want your son to be on this side or that side?" (p.269)

Even on Biju's flight home, the difference between the third-world and first-world is emphasised. Nevertheless, Biju is ecstatic to return to his chaotic, impoverished homeland –

> ".....he felt an unbearable feeling.....like the memory of falling asleep, a baby on his mother's lap..... he felt everything shifting and clicking into place around him, felt himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing – that unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant. ....for the first time in God knows how long ...he could see clearly." (p.300)

Narrating Loss from Within and Without

Kiran Desai narrates the nation with wit and tenderness, empathy and humour. She captures the deep personal import of national events that lasts beyond entire lifetimes. She views India from both inside and outside, Kalimpong and New York. Her expertise in bringing alive the Raj era, the remote North-East marked by natural beauty, rich heritage and gory violence, the sheer beauty of the Himalayas and, life in modern New York is admirable. She uses the mixed method of narration with typical post-modern techniques, innovative Indian English expressions, symbolism and imagery drawn from nature and everyday life, conveying a deep sense of place and atmosphere. The vast untamed wilderness, the all-pervading mist and soaring peaks loom like mighty forces of history over fragile human lives.

In Kalimpong, private existential crises and national turmoil become one. Each character loses something when his or her destiny is yoked to that of the nation. The insurgency makes enemies out of lovers and displaces and dispossesses people. History extracts its revenge for past wrongs from ill-fated innocents. In her description of the Gorkha insurgency, Desai beautifully blends the personal and the public, analysing the psyche of political movements, the injustice of the rulers and the rage of the subaltern. As Lola puts it,

> "What was a country but the idea of it? She thought of India as a concept, a hope, or a desire. How often could you attack it before it crumbled? To undo something took practise; it was a dark art and they were perfecting it." (p.236)

On the other hand, the unreal city of New York is seen through the eyes of rustic Biju. Desai captures the humour and sadness of the rat race for survival where one man's wealth leads to another's poverty. Losing one's identity and yet pretending to retain it, enduring a divided existence and deep loneliness is the price paid for living in the great American melting pot.

It is essentially a novel of loss and grief, of broken lives and relationships. Kiran Desai makes the pathos of life come alive artistically through the loneliness of Sai. With the separation of Sai and Gyan, a rare prospect of happiness comes to an end. In the search of the heartbroken inmates of Cho Oyu for Mutt, the sadness and loss of their separate lives becomes one. Few novels portray so poignantly the pain of the immigrant Indian. If the Judge symbolises the pure hatred of the coloniser for the colonised, Biju symbolises the immigrant's ecstatic return to his motherland. All the same, Desai brings out the humour underlying even the bleakest situations. The narrative is dotted with eccentric characters and her dry satire and lively wit are refreshing. The novel appeals to human emotions cutting across all barriers. The pathos of life is universal. For Biju, the storm in New York mirrors the violence in his native Kalimpong. Both the Teesta and the Hudson are wild rivers that flow both ways, backward and forward. Humans inherit nothing but loss and whatever they gain, that too they lose.

Critical Review

Kiran Desai portrays the impact of regional and national issues and events of the eighties on the lives of ordinary Indians. When the novel opens in 1986, Rajiv Gandhi has just taken over as Prime Minister. The nation is plagued by insurgency and separatism, fuelled by poverty and unemployment resulting from unscrupulous politics and administrative inefficiency. The economic crisis forces people to migrate abroad and lead a hard life. According to Ragini Ramachandra, the relevance of the novel is enhanced by "reference to political turmoil in Kashmir, Punjab, Assam and a sensitive handling of contemporary issues, explosive situations caused by divisive tendencies and discordant elements" (Ramachandra 24). B.K Sharma writes, "This is a novel about the everyday difficulties of modernity.....the inevitability and many faces of oppression, the paradoxes of growth and injustice, and communities struggling with the violence and pain of change" (Sharma 25).

The Inheritance of Loss offers a credible picture of north-eastern India where breathtaking natural beauty and cultural diversity co-exists with

underdevelopment and divisive tendencies. As T.P. Khaund opines, “History and geography had combined to make the North East a distant frontier land and the paradox of being poor...in the midst of plenty” (qtd. in Solanki 75). Historian Meghnad Desai writes, "Ever since its litigious incorporation into the...republic of India, the region has alternately challenged Indian nation building processes and pushed constitutional politics to its limits, with violent and tragic consequences" (Desai 306).

The novel also tries to comprehend the phenomenon of secessionism and violent anti-state movements that plagued India during the eighties. Prof. Ramchandra Guha says, “...the 1980s were an especially turbulent decade. The republic had always been faced with dissenting movements; but never so many, at the same time, in so many parts of India, and expressed with such intensity” (Guha 599). The boundaries of provinces in pre-1947 India had been drawn haphazardly by the British. The case for linguistic states as administrative units was very strong. The Constitutional structure established in 1950 encouraged unity in diversity. It provided for a federation with a strong centre and a great deal of autonomy for the states. The States Reorganisation Act was passed by Parliament in November 1956 but has not satisfied all linguistic or cultural regions to this date. The issues of jobs, educational opportunities, access to political power and share in the larger economic cake fuelled rivalries. Disparities in development gave birth to sub-regional movements for greater autonomy in Telangana in Andhra Pradesh, Vidarbha in Maharashtra, Saurashtra in Gujarat, Bundelkhand in Uttar Pradesh, Darjeeling District or Gorkhaland in West Bengal, Bodoland in Assam, and the old princely states of Orissa. It is because of these regional feelings that today Uttaranchal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Telangana have been created out of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.

The Inheritance of Loss is one of the very few fictional representations of the Gorkhaland movement. According to Kalpana Purohit, the novel does not take political sides. It is about the impact of the GNLF movement on the people of Kalimpong, their reactions to it and how it changes their lives. It is about the victims and the survivors (Purohit 84). Desai captures the human angle of regional politics from the perspective of both rich and poor. Most significantly, she points to poverty as the root cause of separatism. Interestingly, in Naxalbari, situated (like Kalimpong) in the Darjeeling district, economic disparities led to the Maoist-Naxalite movement of 1967- a bloody, armed uprising of peasants against landlords. Kalimpong and Darjeeling- the exclusive colonial hill stations were, from their very inception, divided along economic and ethnic lines that pushed the less affluent to the peripheries (Devi 279). Thus, in the novel, whether

it is the relationships between upper class and lower class protagonists or Nepalis and non- Nepalis, class inequality is the determining factor. Above all, the novelist is equally critical of the government and the rebels. Her sympathies lie with the persecuted masses. According to Krishna Singh, Desai paints a dismal picture of the region and curtly blames the short-sighted discriminatory policies and apathy of the government (K. Singh 94). According to Iffat Maqbool, the novel brilliantly espouses the Gorkha cause and exposes their exploitation in years of misrule by New Delhi but also suggests that the GNLF volunteers do not have a vision beyond the moment (Maqbool 59).

Kiran Desai's portrayal of the events of the Gorkha insurgency ranging from the unrest and bloodshed to the personas of rebel leaders and the end of the crisis conforms to history. Subhash Ghising, the leader of the GNLF, was a former soldier who worked both within the democratic process and used violent methods. After the intense clashes of 1986, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi met Ghising and persuaded him to accept an autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council rather than a separate state for Nepali speakers. The Council, within the state of West Bengal, had wide powers of governance. Sue Halpern writes, ".....Subhash Ghising...proclaimed that this was a better outcome than the creation of a separate state because...leaders and the people will all sit...at the same level...Despite this declaration, Ghising has...continued to push for independence. The official language of the autonomous district is called Gorkhali, a combination of Gorkha and Nepali, stressing the Nepali origin as also the separate Gorkha identity" (Halpern 20). Ghising's agitation was continued by Bimal Gurung's Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJM). *The Week* reported in April 2011 that around one crore people still starve in West Bengal and the people of Darjeeling suffer due to the apathy of the government towards regional development and violent separatist politics (Banerjee 16-20, 22-24). In 2011, the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) agreement was signed between the West Bengal government and the separatists. Tessa Hadley rightly concludes that *The Inheritance of Loss*, "... offers no resolution of the Nepali insurgency for no neat solution is plausible in the face of the tense intricacies of ethnicity, culture, language and class even in this one small piece of India" (Hadley 25-26).

Finally, in dealing with post-colonial issues Kiran Desai grapples with questions ranging from how colonialism shapes the self-images of Indians to how colonial misrule has sown the seeds for regionalism and separatism in free India. According to Sanjay Solanki, the novel is about "the difficult past of India and the consequent difficult future: the colonial rule of two

hundred years is enough to hurt any nation deeply and irretrievably" (Solanki 70).

Desai uses the character of Biju, the illegal Indian immigrant in New York, to analyse the impact of neo-colonial policies and capitalist structures on ordinary Indians. In an interview with *Washington Post*, Kiran Desai said that much of the material for the American portion of her book came from her conversations with illegal immigrants (qtd. in Das 40). Renowned historian Eric Hobsbawm in his book *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism* reiterates that since the 1980s, American hegemony and economic and political globalization has created great inequality. The immigration of the impoverished from third world countries is a major problem in most developed nations. The novel demonstrates how the stranglehold of European neo-colonial structures ruins the discourse of nationalism in developing nations. For all its benefits, globalisation culturally, spiritually or materially impoverishes almost every part of the world. The loss of innocence and tensions created by callous commercialisation in New York are also seen in Kalimpong. When political trouble hits the region, European tourists photograph the poverty or enjoy local artefacts sold at cheap prices. Anita Singh writes, "Desai takes a sceptical look at the western consumer driven multi-culturalism. She is distrustful of economic globalisation as a route to prosperity for the downtrodden" (A. Singh 25). According to Nazia Hasan, the novel refuses to celebrate the hybridity and multiculturalism promised by the new market-oriented world politics and is a compelling critique of postcolonial euphoria (Hasan 88).

In Search of a National Vision

To sum up, Kiran Desai views politics, states and governments as inherently unjust. She satirises India of the eighties mired in backwardness and disharmony -

> "The country...was coming apart at the seams: police unearthing militants in Assam, Nagaland, and Mizoram; Punjab on fire with Indira Gandhi dead and gone.....In Delhi the government had unveiled its new financial plan after much secrecy and debate. It had seemed fit to reduce taxes on condensed milk and ladies' undergarments and raise them on wheat, rice, and kerosene. (p.108)

Secondly, Desai has sympathy for the powerless citizens –

> "There was no system to soothe the unfairness of things; justice was without scope; it might snag the stealer of chickens, but great evasive crimes would have to be dismissed because, if identified and netted, they would bring down the entire structure of so-called civilization. (p.200)

Finally, Desai decries the inhumanity practised in the name of socio-political movements. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel Kiran Desai expressed, "I don't think you can grow up in India without seeing an act of political violence" (qtd. in Ferguson 47).

The Inheritance of Loss looks at national history from the perspective of two teenagers who are yet to fully understand life or their own selves, of struggling youth, elderly, of the decadent colonials- all inheritors of loss who lose so much but also gain a new maturity and awakening in the turbulence of regionalism. All their struggles become one collective priceless journey of humanity. The novel ends with a ray of hope. Amid all the darkness stands the citizen like Sai who can rise above her personal grief to empathize with others. As she struggles to ignite a new spark of hope, she realises that despite gain and loss, life will and must go on. Similarly, Biju regains a meaningful vision of life and death in his return to India. According to Molly Joseph at the darkest moment of despair in the novel, Biju emerges calling the cook "Pitaji" and "the two suffering worlds leap at each other and seek solace...there is the strange mechanism of self healing...this illuminating vision of future, the delayed truth at the end is the ultimate triumph of the novel..." (Joseph 112-113). Yet in the final reference to Mrs. Sen, an admirer of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the national destiny so closely interwoven with the plot and characters is subtly emphasised:

> "And Mrs. Sen...would knit the sweater that Rajiv Gandhi would never wear.....His destiny would be interwoven with a female Tamil Tiger in more intimate fashion than anything Mrs. Sen...could have dreamed of." (p.322)

With Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, the hope of ushering in generational change in Indian politics remains unfulfilled. The tale is left unfinished, the future is unpredictable, the nation is in deep trouble and yet there is an unspoken confidence that the citizen will carry through:

> "The five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden with the kind of luminous light that made you feel, if briefly, that truth was apparent. All you needed to do was to reach out and pluck it." (p.324)

To quote Binnie Kirshenbaum, "A nation's tragedies, great and small, are revealed through the hopes and the dreams, the innocence and the arrogance, the love betrayed and...human failings of a superbly realised cast of characters...Desai writes of postcolonial India, of its poor as well as its privileged, with a cold eye and a warm heart" (qtd. in K. Singh 103-104).

3.4. Mapping Tumultous Times

Both Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss*, paint an unflattering picture of India in the sixties, seventies and eighties. They call for a broad national vision rising above divisions of caste, class and region. In their critique of an epoch wherein narrow interests, orthodoxy and power-politics took precedence over progress in a nation struggling with starvation, they are fearless and incisive. The sole ray of hope is the citizen who soldiers on. Though their protagonists are no match for the system, the humane spirit remains triumphant. The novelists attempt to bridge a divided world, deconstruct power structures and seek justice for the marginalised. The emphasis is on replacing the discourse of the powerful with that of the weak. There is an uncanny resemblance in the core philosophies around which both novels are centred. While Arundhati Roy chooses a line from John Berger as the epitaph of her novel,

> "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one",

Kiran Desai's heroine Sai gets this epiphanic vision towards the end-

> "Life wasn't single in its purpose...or ...direction....Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it." (p.323)

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CHAPTER IV

THE URBAN DILEMMA: RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE 1990S

(MEHER PESTONJI'S *PERVEZ - A NOVEL* AND DAVID DAVIDAR'S *THE SOLITUDE OF EMPERORS*)

Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics.
—-Mahatma Gandhi

4.1. The Paradoxes of the 1990s

The 1990s which saw the advent of globalization in India were marked by sweeping economic reforms and by momentous progress and liberation in every sphere. Ironically, the political scene of the decade was largely unstable. The country witnessed four general elections and the rule of six Prime Ministers within a short span of ten years. There was an unprecedented upsurge of casteism and religious fundamentalism in national politics. In the international sphere, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, India had to re-order her foreign policy and accept Western capitalist globalization. However, Indian confidence and prestige rose with greater economic power and global achievements in spheres ranging from business and industry to cinema, art and literature.

By the end of the eighties, India had started preparing for the twenty-first century, led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government. There was economic progress and significant foreign policy achievements but the issue of corruption in defence deals led to the fall of the Congress government. Following mid-term elections, the National Front government led by V.P. Singh came to power in December 1989. However, differences within this coalition government encouraged divisive tendencies. The

Mandal commission report favouring increased reservation for backward castes in government jobs led to violent and widespread protests by upper-caste youth. On the other hand, Hindu right-wing organisations led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sought to revive the Hindutva ideology as a means to political power. Their claim that the Babri Masjid - a sixteenth century mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh had been built over a temple marking the birthplace of Lord Rama, and hence should be demolished, in order to build a Ram Temple on the same site, became the bone of contention between Hindu and Muslim communities. BJP leader L.K. Advani's six thousand mile long political campaign or *Rath Yatra* across India for the cause of the Ram Temple inflamed communal passions to a feverish pitch. The ensuing religious riots led to many deaths and the National Front government fell in November 1990.

Subsequnetly, the Chandra Shekhar government held office until March 1991 when the next general elections were announced. The Congress party's popular prime ministerial candidate Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by the Sri Lankan terrorist group LTTE during an election campaign in May 1991. The Congress benefitted from a strong sympathy wave and won the elections. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao led the Congress government at the centre for a full five-year term. In order to tide over the debt crisis and bankruptcy facing the nation, he undertook the most radical economic reforms. His government dismantled the state-controlled economic structure and opened Indian economy to the world market. This liberalization paved the way for private entrepreneurial miracles, inflow of foreign exchange and stupendous financial growth. However, the government failed to prevent the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists, leading to widespread and long-lasting bloody Hindu-Muslim riots and violence all over the country that challenged national security and integrity. Gradually, there was a slowing down of economic reforms and growth, and charges of bribery and foreign exchange violations surfaced against many Congress leaders.

In the 1996 general elections no political party won a clear majority. The BJP arose as a powerful national player. Between 1996 and 1998 the country was under two United Front governments led by H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral with the support of the Congress and Communist parties. Fresh elections in 1998 led to the formation of a BJP-led government with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Prime Minister. However, the instability of the large coalition government led to elections in 1999. The new millennium was ushered in by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government with Vajpayee again at the helm.

A number of novels have been written on the national scene in the 1990s. The corruption in ministerial, bureaucratic and corporate circles is discussed in the novels of Malathi Rao, Kishore Bhimani, Jayabroto Chatterjee, Anurag Mathur, Nalinaksha Bhattacharya, Kiran Doshi, S.K.Banerjee, Avatar Singh, Shiv Sharma and N.K.Singh. The arrival of westernisation and the rise of the working classes are reflected by novels like Ashok Banker's *Vertigo* (1993) and *Byculla Boy* (1997) and Sagarika Ghose's *Gin Drinkers* (2000). While Timeri Murari's *Enduring Affairs* (1990) explores the murky politics of the eighties and nineties, the troubled politics of Punjab and Kashmir is dealt with by Romen Basu and Vikram Chandra. The rise of communalism, the Ayodhya dispute and subsequent riots are the subject of several novels. Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) bemoans the 1992-93 riots in Bombay and the degeneration of an all-inclusive nationalism into hatred and violence. Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* (2001) is based on the actual impact of the 1992-93 riots in Madhya Pradesh and expresses anxiety about the rise of fundamentalism. In this context, Meher Pestonji's *Pervez – A Novel* (2003) and David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007) capture the essence of the national scene in the nineties.

Meher Pestonji, a journalist and activist, and David Davidar, an editor and publisher, well-known in their respective professions, have risen to prominence as fiction writers with their works published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Meher Pestonji's *Pervez* and Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* cast an introspective and retrospective look at the nation in the last decade of the twentieth century. Deeply concerned over the rise of religious fundamentalism, they view the communal politics of the 1990s as an urban phenomenon. Both narratives revolve around the Ayodhya dispute, the demolition of the Babri mosque and the consequent riots in Bombay during 1992-1993. They are imbued with the spirit of Bombay and there is an uncanny similarity in the reporting of the precursors, actual events and aftermath of the communal crisis. The characters symbolise the national psyche scarred by religious divisions. In the battle of the protagonists with communal forces, the intertwining of the personal and the national is finely portrayed. While poignantly chronicling the lethal mixing of religion and politics, the novelists expose politicians who create divisions of religion, culture and class for political gains. They advocate secularism as a necessary social and political principle in the multi-religious and multi-cultural Indian democracy.

4.2. Meher Pestonji's *Pervez – A Novel* (2003)

Born in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1946, journalist and social activist Meher Pestonji has fought for the oppressed and underprivileged, for rape-victims, slum-dwellers and street children, since the 1970s. The communal riots of 1992-93 fuelled her resolve to fight communalism and parochialism. Disillusioned with market-oriented journalism, she switched to creative writing. She has emerged as a powerful writer with two novels - *Pervez (2003)* and *Sadak Chhaap (2005). Sadak Chhaap* depicting Mumbai's street children reflects her voluntary work with them. This popular, widely translated novel campaigns against the neglect and abuse of India's huge population of street children. Her collection of short stories - *Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories (1999)* has been admired for its insight into Parsi life, its style, characterization and treatment of social and moral issues.

Pervez, Meher Pestonji's debut novel*,* is set in Bombay of the nineties, ravaged by religious riots. Aditi De writing in the *Hindu Literary Review* describes *Pervez* as, "a compassionate but topical look at our collective lives in the throes of saffronisation, communal divides and societal disparities... ." De continues, "Who are we, as a people? Where are we headed? What defines an individual within the bounds of nationhood? Is secularism a valid ideal as the ground shifts beneath our feet? These questions remain uppermost in the reader's mind throughout the novel" (De, *Hindu Literary Review* www.thehindu.com). *Pervez* is also a novel of education portraying the fascinating growth of a woman from political innocence to maturity, from weak feminine to a woman of conviction, from blissful ignorance to striking awareness of one's own inner potential. The heroine Pervez finds her identity while confronting communalists and fundamental beliefs. She observes India with compassion and objectivity, finally finding fulfilment as a social worker and activist.

One Woman versus A Catastrophe

The central figure of Meher Pestonji's *Pervez* is the bold and beautiful young woman Pervez. Born into an affluent Parsi family in Bombay, Pervez is sensitive and intelligent, with a kindness that transcends all boundaries. She defies her parents to marry for love into a poor Goan Christian family. Cheated by her husband, she divorces him and returns to her brother Darius in Bombay, where she is looked down upon by relatives. Here, at twenty-nine, Pervez the rebel begins life anew, for she no longer fits into the elite social circle of her brother.

Having faced the vagaries of life, Pervez introspects and retrospects. Introduced to Communism by her activist friends Naina and Siddharth, she is challenged to join the ranks of the poorest. Attracted by their austerity and commitment, she leaves her posh family home for the poor suburb of Kalina. However, her open-mindedness prevents her from blindly accepting any ideology even as she meets a host of socially and politically conscious citizens. She meets Pawan - a photographer and activist, Prabha - a feminist, Vandana - a model, Vishal - a Dalit leader, Saeed - a poor Muslim social worker and his brother Munnawar who has an affair with a Hindu girl in the worst of times. While everybody debates the Hindu-Muslim tensions and condemns L.K. Advani's *Rath Yatra* advocating the building of a Ram Temple at the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, Pervez is rather ignorant about the national crisis. She educates herself on national issues, absorbing everything, shunning all extremes and pragmatically synthesizing the best views. While admiring the idealistic fervour of her Communist friends, she realizes that the idea of a People's Revolution to achieve a totally classless society is utopian. While appreciating the Gandhians, she wonders if their gentleness can counter ruthless modern fundamentalists. Her concern is with how the battered spirit of communal harmony can be rekindled and made to percolate where needed. Henceforth, her personal destiny would be increasingly intertwined with national events.

Pervez starts visiting the slums of Dharavi for social work and street-theatre. The Ayodhya movement begins. As right-wing Hindu organizations mobilize support for the Ram Temple and target minorities, Pervez's friends like Siddharth find innovative ways to reconcile Hindus and Muslims. Pervez involves Muslim youth like Munnawar in social service. At the Governor's peace-march attended by celebrities and commoners, Pervez muses –

> "....the battle against communal hatred transcended class. And demanded coordination between classes. What role could she play in that process?" (p.108)

She finds deep satisfaction in organizing exhibitions and cultural programmes promoting secularism. She is elated to see the bonds that bind a diverse nation together.

On the other hand, Pervez's brother Darius and his family doctor Dilip Kanitkar openly advocate communal harmony, while Vasant Chawla, the corrupt hotel tycoon, represents radical Hinduism. He says,

> "Whether Ram lived or not is not important. If Hindus believe this is where he was born then that piece of land becomes sacred to them. And they must have Ram temple… You don't know what it is to experience Partition... I lost one brother in Lahore. Killed by the son of the Muslim dai who breastfed him." *(*p.70)

Darius' wife Dhun represents the selfish elite who refuse to take a stand. Blind to the fact that rampaging rioters are nearing her own home, she supports Vasant Chawla.

The demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu fanatics, on 6 December 1992, leads to Hindu-Muslim riots. Trapped in Dharavi on the fateful day, Pervez is shocked by the human savagery, by scenes of murder, arson and looting. Risking her own life, she saves a child from rampaging mobs, and stops two groups from throwing petrol bombs at each other. She walks home alone through the curfew. Her heroism surprises all. She calls herself a 'survivor'. While the city is torn apart by hatred and fear, politicians cater to vote-banks and police become mere agents of communalists –

> "The administration crumbled, became dysfunctional within hours…The city kept burning…Bombay was left scarred with wounds that would never heal." (p.249)

As riots break out repeatedly, Pervez and her friends comfort victims, focusing on rebuilding trust and keeping politicians away. A new, confident Pervez emerges - donating blood and distributing food in burning slums. Yet, she is traumatized when Munnawar is stabbed. She doubts the existence of God who remains silent as people kill in His name. The vicious cycle of violence culminates in the serial bomb blasts that rock Bombay in March 1993.

It is the wisdom and courage of commoners that finally reins in the riots. The citizens of Bombay unite across barriers. Pervez works hard as a leader in both elite circles and slums, to expose rioters, crush rumours and prejudices, and to educate people about nation-building. She criticises her own minority Parsi community for remaining aloof and decides to act alone on their behalf to reunite Hindus and Muslims. She gives new voice to ordinary women who suffer most during riots though they do not condone the violence perpetrated by men. In one of the many peace marches, Pervez finds a radical Shiv Sena activist masquerading as a man of peace and exposes him before television cameras. She recognizes the 'sham' of 'high culture' as she finds the elite exploiting the situation for

personal gains. Horrified as masks fall off, she fears if she too would one day become insensitive to human suffering.

Pervez's handling of the aftermath of the Bombay riots marks the culmination of her personal transformation through involvement in national life. In the decisive stage of her political maturation as a citizen, she declares an all-out war against communalists. She begins with the powerful hotelier Vasant Chawla who had been laughing and drinking as rioters burned slums near his hotel. She forces him to see pictures of burnt, butchered and disfigured bodies with the face of his grandson Gaurav superimposed on them, saying,

> "Gaurav's face has been superimposed over the faces of real victims to make you realise what those families have suffered...Thousands of people throughout the country are suffering because gullible people were egged on into committing crimes they wouldn't dream of in their normal senses." (p.280)

As Pervez leaves Vasant Chawla sobbing, the novelist observes,

> "...Pervez was a new woman. She had tasted power." *(*p.281)

Even as she advocates psychological warfare, Pervez observes,

> "It's necessary to be aggressive about non-violence....The Gandhians... may be wonderful people but they're out of their depth in today's world. To be effective you have to speak the same language as militants, in your own way." (p.282)

Despite the scepticism of her friends, Pervez takes the women and children of riot-hit Dharavi on a picnic. She assures them of a better future. When a little girl asks her if she would remain alive to see this future, Pervez feels the unseen mental trauma of a nation:

> "The past...can it ever be erased.....How would today's collective memory shape the future? Could people forgive neighbours who'd looted and burnt? Would grief drive some insane? Would Bombay's cosmopolitan character survive?" (p.285)

Once Pervez has broken the shackles in public life, she finds new courage in private life. She charts her own course. Having learnt a bitter lesson from her marriage, she ensures she is not emotionally exploited again, whether it is the short affair with Pawan or the insults of her ex-suitor Farhad or the apology of her ex-husband Fred. She desires genuine, spiritual love but feels most men would not subscribe to it. She fears she

may have been infected with HIV by her faithless husband. The novel lyrically sums up her emotional state of mind –

> "The memory of love in all its innocence. Nostalgia for loss of innocence. Pain at knowing innocence can never be restored. And enduring tenderness." (p.229)

After the riots, Pervez is unconcerned with mundane desires. She finds a greater mission in fighting religious intolerance and serving the less privileged.

The epilogue of the novel is set nearly a decade later in 2002. Communal forces continue to dominate the national polity. The Ayodhya movement is revived by Hindu radicals with the active support of the right-wing BJP government at the centre. The horror of the Godhra riots in Gujarat is played out. Still single and living in her small flat in Kalina, Bombay, Pervez is a lecturer in Psychology and is actively involved in social work. Her friend Naina's husband Siddharth, now senior correspondent with *The Hindu* newspaper, is sent to Gujarat to cover the riots. He is assaulted for exposing the government sponsored pogrom of genocide against Muslims. He survives the near fatal bullet and returns to Bombay to recuperate. Siddharth and Naina share horrifying accounts of Hindus and Muslims being roasted alive, women gang-raped, infants battered and burnt, of wombs ripped open and families torn apart. Shaken, Pervez and her students set out for relief camps in Gujarat. Bravely fighting their own disillusionment, they offer moral support and material help to victims. Pervez returns to Bombay, filled with doubt and dejected by the attitude of the rulers. The novel ends with a prayer for peace.

A Nation in Darkness

Firstly, the novel traces the factors responsible for the communal crisis and the forces fighting these negative elements. For instance, Meher Pestonji's heroine Pervez exemplifies the modern outlook and self-awareness of the Indian woman in the 1990s. Though disowned by her parents and cheated by her husband, she does not regret her love marriage or divorce. Proud and dignified, she refuses the charity of her rich brother Darius. She fights the scorn of conservatives and the unwelcome attention of womanizers. As soon as she returns to Bombay in 1990, she is drawn into political discussions. The conversations at the party thrown by Darius reveal the charged atmosphere -

> "...We're talking of globalization, of attracting foreign capital.....and then we have a sati in Rajasthan, a politician going on a rath-yatra. The West will think we're going back to the Dark Ages."....."...someone has to put those Mussalmaans in place. First they divide our country, make their Pakistan, still want to be big boss here! And Congress party panders to all their whims." (p.9, 10)

Pervez is repulsed by the transformation of Bombay for communalism has pervaded its most sophisticated societies, its beaches are dirty and its walls are stained with religious slogans.

On the other hand, a socialist movement is initiated by some educated citizens. They fight capitalists and politicians who divide the masses. They support struggles of the downtrodden. As the *Rath Yatra* progresses, they condemn the dangerous politics of saffronisation –

> "Heard the latest on the rath-yatra?....There's this Hindutva fanatic called Advani who's driving around the country in a Toyota decorated like a fifteenth-century chariot....He makes such inflammatory speeches that there are communal riots.....seventeen people...were burnt alive in a village.....That man should be flogged...If the government wanted they could have stopped him. But Advani's riding a popular wave, and they're worried about their vote bank." (p.43)

While politicians incite religious passions, a few still retain sanity. As Darius puts it,

> "Hinduism has so many faces...Hinduism of mythology.....of philosophy.....the Hinduism practised in yoga.... The Hindutva Advani espouses is the lowest form of political aggrandisement." (p.56)

The rise of communal politics in the nineties is linked to the feminist movement by Pervez's friends. Prabha the feminist social worker explains how right-wing Hindu politicians had cleverly usurped the women's movement -

> "For years women's groups have been demanding equality before law for women of different communities.... The Women's Conference at Trivandrum was the first to demand a Uniform Civil Code way back in 1984. Now these Hindutva guys have made it into a Hindu versus Muslim campaign to impose their code on Muslims who have been governed by Shariat law..." (p.46)

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had added to the damage by appeasing both communities – submitting to the Islamic Shariat law

(which is discriminatory to women) in the Shah Bano case and allowing Hindu radicals to worship their idols inside the Babri Mosque. As religious intolerance and fanaticism worsens, feminists and secularists find themselves fighting the powerful orthodoxy. Hindu fanatics even advocate inhuman customs like *sati* or the burning of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre -

> "The...Rajput custom, practised by women to escape being gangraped by invaders in medieval times, had been glorified to fuel Hindu revivalism in 1987..." (p.73)

Casteism, deep class-divides and regionalism also encourage communalism. Meher Pestonji bares the tattered social fabric. Upper and lower caste Hindus clash over the recommendations of the Mandal commission providing more government jobs to lower castes. The agony of the Dalits who are denied dignity, jobs and education, is seen in the speeches and songs of Pervez's friend Vishal. The greatest blow comes when a riot-victim refuses blood donated by Vishal. Pestonji also castigates the radical and tyrannical Shiv Sena, a major regional party in Maharashtra and a chief player in the 1992 riots. It had been established by Bal Thackeray, a cartoonist-cum-journalist and an admirer of Hitler. Several of its leaders have criminal records. Their violent regionalism thrives on underdevelopment.

The contemporary economic situation marred by religious passions, is also depicted. The tottering economy is on the way to vital liberal reforms. Most businessmen, like Darius, exult over the open economy. But radicals like hotelier Vasant Chawla are bent on establishing Hindu dominion over Muslims, giving precedence to religious fanaticism over the law. On the other hand, the views of moderate Hindus are voiced by Dr. Kanitkar –

> "Nothing in Hinduism would justify breaking one place of worship to build another...Babri masjid is three hundred years old. Why not build a Ram temple next to it?" (p. 69)

After comprehensively sketching the build-up to the communal crisis, the narrative moves closer to the riots that would soon break out all over India, especially in Bombay, as the movement to build a Ram Temple in Ayodhya gained momentum. The epicentre of the Bombay riots is Asia's largest slum, Dharavi, full of enterprise and passion. Pervez and her friends try to sensitize the ignorant masses against self-seeking religious fundamentalists. But the Shiv Sena infiltrates into the slums, hindering peace movements and rousing religious passions. Characters from Dharavi

testify to the explosive situation. Soon, the upper class also senses the heat of the communal tensions. A peace march is organised at Chowpatty, wherein politicians and students, industrialists and elite ladies, religious leaders and film stars, fishermen and domestic servants, all march together.

After the Allahabad High Court permits the Uttar Pradesh state government to acquire land for building the Ram Temple, Pervez's activist friends Siddharth and Pawan visit Ayodhya and bring disturbing news. Ayodhya, a town where Hindus and Muslims lived amicably for centuries, has ten thousand Ram temples and numerous mosques. An eighty-four year old Muslim priest claims that the Babri Mosque had been used by Muslims since 1885. Shastri Laldas, chief priest of the Ram Temple admits to placing an idol of Lord Rama inside the mosque in 1949, after receiving divine instructions in a dream shared by many. However both Hindus and Muslims resent the opportunistic political interference of BJP and Congress parties. The BJP's strength in Parliament increases from two to eighty-five seats, after raking up the *Ramjanmabhumi* issue. After the court order, local residents are forced to give their lands to the Ram Temple complex without compensation. Nevertheless, Pawan and Siddharth return with a positive image of the Indian people-

> "The people...were wonderful...Both Hindus and Muslims told us they've been celebrating each others' festivals, attending each others' weddings, helping each other through sickness and death....They're determined not to let outsiders disrupt their lives." (p. 128)

Meher Pestonji then recounts the eve of the 1992 Bombay riots from first-hand experience. Video parlours show speeches of right-wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leaders. Muslims are provoked by derogatory references. If Shiv Sena activists place Hindu idols in Muslim localities, Muslim leaders plan to erect their *dargahs* or shrines in Hindu areas. The minority Muslim community feels betrayed by the Congress government in the state which has surrendered to the whims of the Shiv Sena.

The country at large is pervaded by barbarism. Shiv Sena men pour tar on the pitch to stop an India-Pakistan cricket match. The Muslim Jamaat orders a woman to be publicly lashed for adultery. Yet, there are enlightened voices terming both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists as equally dangerous and the failure to condemn them as condonation. The ordinary citizen desires only peace and harmony.

On 6 December 1992, the nation is shocked as *karsevaks* (volunteers of extremist Hindu groups) demolish the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya while the government remains a mute spectator. Unprecedented riots erupt all over

India. Pestonji focuses on Dharavi - one of the worst-hit areas in Bombay. As news of the demolition pours in, grieving, insecure and belligerent Muslims start preparing for war. Shiv Sena workers march through the streets shouting pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim slogans. Soon, rampaging mobs go on a killing spree. Weapons range from stones, knives and sticks to torches, swords, guns and crude bombs. None is spared – neither the sick nor women, neither elderly nor infants. Dharavi resembles a ghost town as terror grips the masses. In Mahim and Santa Cruz, only the badly injured or dazed are seen outdoors. At Deonar, Muslims are slaughtered. Hindu, Muslim and Christian families struggle to protect women and children, to attend to the injured and bury the dead.

Meher Pestonji describes the riots from her twin perspectives as social activist and journalist. She airs her strong feelings through her shocked and grieving heroine Pervez –

> "For all their good intentions, neither the government nor the Gandhians, nor the leading lights of every religion and profession had managed to stymie the holocaust.... Devastation had hit the whole nation. Each morning's headlines horrified as the death toll mounted in state after state. .....Another surprise was parallel violence in Pakistan and Bangladesh where Muslims attacked temples in retaliation for Babri masjid..... Whether Hindu attacked Muslim or vice versa was irrelevant. What mattered was hundreds of lives lost, thousands of families afflicted by grief, devastated homes, destroyed means of livelihood." (p.203, 204)

As riot victims line up for paltry government compensation, tragic stories surface. The plight of the minorities is brought alive by a Muslim man who struggles to identify the corpse of his innocent son, shot dead in police custody. As someone puts it at a peace meeting,

> "This was not a Hindu-Muslim riot, it was a police-Muslim riot." (p.225)

Overcoming his anti-sensationalism, Pervez's co-activist Siddharth publishes his gruesome photos of the riots, in order to stir people. Such is the magnitude of the violence that hundreds are killed in a single slum and even grandmothers are raped. Then there is Sabina, the news reporter who returns from Ayodhya with a fractured arm and recounts how power-hungry fundamentalist politicians had destroyed the Babri Mosque -

> "People like ants, crawling all over the place. Leaders egging on karsevaks, shouting slogans like 'Ek dhakka aur do, Babri masjid tod do.' BJP, VHP leaders watching without batting an eyelid..." (p. 222)

The vicious violence in Bombay continues. Army and special police platoons are pressed into service. Government hospitals are crowded with bleeding victims. Newly-married brides are widowed. Women keep watch at nights frightening away intruders. In Jogeshwari, Hindu families are burnt alive. Extortion, robbery and usurpation abound. Muslims are arrested and terrorized. The Koran is desecrated. The police machinery surrenders to political gangsters. Power is grossly abused. Personal vendetta becomes easy. The fresh outbreaks of violence are more sinister. *Saamna*, the Shiv Sena's newspaper encourages annihilation of Muslims. The government remains passive as Shiv Sainiks wreak havoc –

> "Following an editorial declaring 'The next few days will be ours', Sainiks stormed the streets. Muslim homes and business establishments were targeted as never before....areas with a dominant Muslim population went up in flames. Black smoke hovered...enveloping Bombay in the darkest days of its existence. ...The state chief minister attending the Assembly session in Nagpur took two days to fly back to Bombay. The defence minister flew down from Delhi and returned within hours. The army stood on alert without instructions to act. ...Violence petered out only after *Saamna* carried another editorial triumphantly proclaiming 'A lesson has been taught'." (p.249)

Subsequently, there is a great exodus of Muslims from Bombay.

The novelist also captures the far-reaching implications of the riots. The Hindu community is in a dilemma - perplexed by anti-Muslim propaganda and emotionally blackmailed in the name of religion. Helpless moderates like Dr. Kanitkar feel guilty for the uncondonable crimes. He regrets Muslims being punished for sixteenth century Mughal emperor Babar's alleged action of razing a temple and building a mosque over it. He laments,

> "Hawks get militant when moderates remain silent. We intellectuals are guilty of abandoning our religion to fanatics and fundamentalists." (p.231)

The economy suffers as business losses in the financial capital Bombay mount to three hundred crores per day. The reign of fanatics scares away foreign investors.

Amid the beastliness and gloom, secular forces fighting for peace and unity offer hope. Pervez represents ordinary civilians who oppose divisive forces. From the time the tensions begin, to the peak of the rioting and even after peace is restored, Pervez and her companions engage in selfless social work, offering material aid and emotional succour to victims. They reconcile people of varied creeds, castes and classes. They unleash a

strong campaign against self-seeking communal politicians. Throughout the novel, Meher Pestonji refers to the valiant efforts of civil society groups such as *Sahamat, Anhad, Communalism Combat* and *Citizens for Justice and Peace* with whom she was closely associated. Peace Committees and prayer meetings are organized in each locality with the support of community leaders. Hindu and Muslim neighbours who have saved each other's lives agree that retributive violence is self-destructive and is engineered by outsiders. There is an open dialogue and even policemen apologize for police atrocities. The novelist feels only such initiatives really matter.

The potential of subaltern groups is manifested through Pervez who is a woman from the minority Parsi community. The role of Parsis during the national crisis is analysed. The novelist equates their non-interference to cowardice. A scathing attack is made on Parsis in Malcolm Baug who refuse to shelter Muslims, leaving them to be burnt alive. Pervez, angered by the non-interference of her community, deliberates on how individuals like her could bring sanity to people driven insane by the communal virus. On the other hand, the novel appreciates Parsi families who protect their Muslim neighbours from rioters. Parsi industrialist Ratan Tata's bold, secular stand is lauded. The novelist, herself a Parsi, emphasizes that Parsis should affirm themselves and act as peace-makers between Hindu and Muslim communities.

Even as commoners valiantly struggle to restore normalcy, Bombay is rocked by serial bomb blasts in March 1993 – an act of retribution by the Muslim underworld. The soul of the nation is shaken and Bombay the heart of the Indian economy comes to a standstill. The novelist salutes the courage that helps the shattered city to rise again –

> "As the city of her birth was torn apart by twelve bombs in two hours, Pervez, like thousands of citizens, had been galvanised into proving Bombay's resilient spirit could not be destroyed. Blood banks filled within hours. Volunteers set up patrols helping families trace missing persons. Pamphlets were printed overnight cautioning people against the dreaded RDX." (p.315-316)

Professionals, activists, artists, businessmen unite to raise public morale. People of all classes and creeds join hands for miles and sing the national anthem -

> "A strange tenor crept over Bombay. Citizens waiting for four o'clock when a siren would sound. Uniting them as they were before the violence that tore them apart. A unity that could at best be fragile in the hours after trust is lost. Yet it is yearned for. And in the yearning lies hope. ..... The

> human chain would link citizens to one another, graphically symbolising the united spirit of Bombay that prided itself in its cosmopolitan character. ...A characteristic indispensible for Bombay to remain the commercial capital of the nation. ..... People raised clasped arms skyward... imploring benedictions... 'Jaya jaya jaya jaya hey!' they roared in one voice. Followed by pin-drop silence. As if the gods had descended in response. ...For a few moments people stood motionless, mesmerised by their own voices. Slowly they dispersed." (p.287, 288, 293)

Pervez is essentially a novel about Bombay and by extension, about Indian cities changed by the communalization of politics, the politicization of religion and by capitalist globalization. In the epilogue, Pestonji differentiates between old, genial Bombay and its new version- greedy, materialistic Mumbai. Ten years after the nineties holocaust, the twenty-first century sees genocide repeated in Gujarat. Pestonji makes a bold political statement through journalist Siddharth who discovers that the riots at Godhra are started by cleverly pitting innocent, devout Hindus and Muslims against each other. The truth remains hidden in an impenetrable veil of conspiracies and confusion, lies and rumours. Siddharth states,

> "This is genocide actively sponsored by the state. Everywhere we went Muslims were being burnt alive to replicate the horror Hindus must have suffered on the train. In some place ministers and government officers were actually leading mobs. Other times the state was passively guilty with policemen standing by as mobs plundered, looted, killed. ..... It's part of a well-orchestrated game plan worked on for years...Ever since the BJP came to power they've been pushing Hindutva ideology rather than running the state. Encouraging government servants to join the RSS, promoting officers who toe their line, introducing Hindutva ideas into school and college textbooks. ..... Today it's Gujarat. Ten years later it'll be the whole of India." (p.304, 305)

Pestonji is stinging in her criticism of the Gujarat government. A small boy's account is used to narrate the infamous Quasarbi case where a pregnant Muslim woman's womb is ripped open. Though world-wide condemnation pours in, the picture is one of despair -

> "Two months after Godhra, killings continued unabated with the chief minister remaining securely in the saddle while his goons ran amok around the state. It took two months for Bombay's powerful citizens to wake up and...protest. A flaccid response to genocide. Yet it was important. Without protests the steaming communal cauldron would erupt into larger confabulations...inwardly she was raging over the helplessness of civil society in the face of organised crime. Her poster, denouncing the Chief Minister as Chief Murderer, had been torn into shreds by a

> policewoman. In frustration Pervez spat into a gutter near the policewoman's foot, a gesture she had never contemplated earlier." (p. 316)

The vicious impact of communal politics initiated in the 1990s on national life continues.

Several post-colonial issues are also discussed. The entire novel mirrors the repercussions of the colonial divide and rule policy which encouraged Hindu-Muslim animosity. The epilogue is proof of the continuance of imperialism in the guise of capitalism-

> "The march into the twenty-first century.....had also changed people. 'Yeh Dil Mange More', 'Feed Your Greed', 'Shop Till You Drop'. Modern mantras plastered across Mumbai's billboards. Bombay would have been embarrassed by them... A city of old-world courtesies. With pride in multiplicity, tolerance, enterprise.....In just about a decade Bombay had transformed from a benevolent giant with a belly big enough for all into Mumbai where empty-headed socialites vied for space on Page Three.....With the glamourisation of trivia came the deadening of minds. And decline in ethical judgement." (p.295, 296)

The way ahead is also shown by the novelist –

> "Impossible to move the clock back. But imperative to sift grain from chaff. And make space for grain to take root again. Despite cemented soil." (p.296)

Poetic Journalism

In *Pervez-A Novel*, private trauma and public struggles blend effortlessly as the life of the heroine Pervez and the national crises of 1992-93 are juxtaposed. The agony of Pervez, a divorcee, who in the prime of her life finds her world shattered, is captured well. Pushed to the margins of traditional society, she tries to escape from painful memories. The novel debates changing definitions of love and marriage, shallowness of contemporary relationships, and the hard life of modern educated women. Returning to Bombay in the 1990s, Pervez's sensitive soul is seared by loneliness and by the communal turmoil in the nation. She struggles to find meaning and truth in life. The encounter with social activists creates a dilemma in her. While austerity is attractive, it is hard to practise. A chance experiment with a different way of life leads to a seminal change. She rebels against the elite class to which she belongs by joining the ranks of the middle and lower classes. She tries to overcome

her inhibitions as she realizes that working for social reform is fraught with danger. Her untamed spirit finds succour in nature. She feels that her bitter experiences have liberated her. A poetess, she empathizes with the poor but also knows how the rich can cry for love. She epitomizes the need for flexibility, moderation and reconciliation in national life. Since she subscribes to no dogma or ideology, she can bridge the world of the rich with that of the poor. The author uses nature imagery to portray her anguish as commoners turn into heartless rioters, the world around burns and human relations change forever. Yet, she stands out in her ability to transform personal tragedy into social dedication. Personal loss paves the way for national gain. She overcomes despair and channelizes her anger in the right direction. She voices the existential dilemma of the individual citizen vis-à-vis national destiny:

> "Each life is no more significant to the city than a grain of sand to the sea....yet vitally significant to those one shares life with..... are people at the mercy of fate, like sand perennially pounded by the sea?" (p 285)

Secondly, in her masterly depiction of the Bombay riots, Meher Pestonji admirably expresses the pain of a nation forcibly divided along communal lines. The narrative is marked by sorrow for a fast-changing nation losing its tolerance and peace due to divisive politics. The appalling human depravity during the riots is always juxtaposed with the never-say-die spirit of Mumbai which triumphs over hatred. Still, trust once breached, is never the same again. The young Muslim boy Munnawar is bent on leaving Bombay. What is roguishness to Pervez is survival strategy to Munnawar who is both rioter and victim. The secular ideology of the elite becomes impossible to implement in the life and death struggle of the slums. The conflict is resolved when Pervez swings into decisive action, targeting communalists. In the final analysis, the resilience and desire for peace on the part of the citizen redeems the nation. In the epilogue dealing with the Gujarat riots of 2002, the escalating communalism in the country is contrasted with past riots since the protagonists remain the same. The novel ends on a rather disturbing note with the nation, the civil society and state machinery, humanity itself, ravaged by religious passions and communal politics. The novel goes beyond the Hindu-Muslim conflict to a universal idea of true religion based on humanism. Also, several instances in the novel prove that Pestonji believes in using all forms of art to broaden the mind and thus combat communalism.

To sum up the stylistic merits, the characterization is strong with real and diverse characters. The language is a literal translation of the slang or

dialect used by her characters - whether upper class or slum-dwellers, Goan villagers or poor Parsis. The authentic narration of history sounds mostly journalistic yet has poetic depth. The novelist imparts beauty to the tiny details of mundane life. She makes subtle use of metaphors drawn from nature to convey changing moods and the emptiness and rootlessness of humans of the new millennium.

Critical Review

Pervez is a novel that weaves together several vital national issues. It poignantly portrays the dilemma of the citizen caught between regressive and progressive forces in the nineties. The destiny of the heroine becomes synonymous with that of the nation. It is a rare instance of the fictional depiction of an Indian woman influencing the socio-political scene. Pervez's rebelliousness and initiative challenge conventional images of the third-world woman.

At the outset, the backdrop of the national communal crisis is thoroughly analysed. Each important event is debated through characters representing different ideologies. The tensions arising from L.K.Advani's *Rath Yatra*, the rise of religious orthodoxy and patriarchy, the increasing class and caste conflicts, the resurgence of the battered economy - references to all these offer a comprehensive picture of the paradoxes of the nineties. It is worth noting that the controls-ridden economic structure had created a massive fiscal and debt crisis in 1991, pushing India into initiating revolutionary economic reforms, led by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and finance minister Manmohan Singh. Gurcharan Das writes, "The economic revolution that Narasimha Rao launched in the middle of 1991 may well be more important than the political revolution that Jawaharlal Nehru initiated in 1947" (Das 213). This involved fiscal corrections, liberalisation of trade and industry, public sector reform and encouragement of foreign investment, thus equipping the economy to participate advantageously in globalisation. As a result, the economy saw a growth-rate of over seven percent with agriculture, industries and commerce doing very well. Foreign direct investment and foreign exchange reserves improved and the debt situation moved away from crisis. Unfortunately, the religious conflagration in 1992 came as a blow to the economy.

The novel documents the subtle ways in which communal politics enters the social arena and feeds on societal evils and disparities. Caste and gender discrimination as also class-conflicts weaken the social fabric and prepare fertile ground for religious extremism to take root in frustrated

minds. The increasing repression of women by patriarchal religious traditions is a precursor to communal conflict. Pestonji cites the example of the Shah Bano case to demonstrate the gross injustice meted out to divorced Muslim women by the Shariat law. She also condemns the glorification of *sati* or widow-burning by Hindu fanatics. The feminists and secularists find themselves facing a common enemy. Historians opine that in the nineties most legal rights extended to women remained on paper and government efforts met with stiff opposition from religious communities as in the Shah Bano case (Chandra 642,643). Again, Tanika Sarkar opines that Hindu communalism works through carefully nurtured cultural organisations. The right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which advocates domesticity and gender subordination for women, brings them forward as defenders of Hindu tradition during communal conflagrations (Sarkar 131-159).

Just before the nationwide riots erupt, the novelist revisits the root cause of the Hindu-Muslim dispute - the Ayodhya issue. Her analysis of ground realities in the holy city of Ayodhya is objective. According to historians, Ayodhya, regarded as the birthplace of the Hindu deity Lord Rama, is an ancient city in Uttar Pradesh where both Hindus and Muslims revere Rama. Muslim rulers of yore had patronised Ayodhya and there are several temples built and managed by Muslims. However the atmosphere has been vitiated by the entry of corruption, money and politics into religious life (Nandy 1-5). A mosque was built by the Mughal emperor Babur at Ayodhya in the early sixteenth century. Some Hindus claimed in the nineteenth century that it was built over a temple marking the birthplace of Rama. In December 1949, a district magistrate permitted few Hindus to install idols in the mosque. When the central government condemned the action, the state government barred the mosque to both Hindus and Muslims, referring the dispute to the courts. In the eighties, extremist Hindu organisations led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) started a whirlwind campaign to demolish the mosque and erect a temple in its place. In February 1986, the district judge, prompted by the Congress Chief Minister, permitted Hindus to worship in the mosque, resulting in widespread riots. In the late 1980s, the right-wing political outfit BJP gained power by making the Ram Temple its official agenda and rousing the Hindu community with its all-India *Rath Yatra*. The BJP-VHP organized a huge rally of two lakh volunteers at the site of the mosque on 6th December, 1992. Despite government assurances that the mosque would be protected, BJP-VHP volunteers demolished the mosque with hammer blows while their leaders watched. The central government lay paralysed and the country was stunned. Historians consider the destruction

of the Babri Masjid as a watershed in the politics of independent India. According to Meghnad Desai, "This was the most blatant act of defiance of the law in modern Indian history, and the Indian state has stood by helpless or, worse still, approving.....After the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Indian politics lost its innocence" (Desai 398,400). All these historical events are mirrored by Pestonji, chiefly through characters who visit Ayodhya before and after the Babri demolition. They mention the discontent of the prominent Hindu and Muslim leaders as also commoners in Ayodhya with the interference of opportunistic politicians in the Ayodhya dispute. The same findings, based on interviews with the persons concerned, are echoed by Ashis Nandy and others in their seminal historical work *Creating a Nationality – The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self* (1998).

Meher Pestonji was actively involved as a peace activist and relief worker during the Bombay riots. She unfailingly records both the horrors as also the nobility and courage of ordinary Hindus and Muslims. According to historical accounts which corroborate her narration, immediately after the demolition of the Babri Mosque, communal riots, the worst since Partition, broke out all over India, the worst hit being Bombay, Calcutta and Bhopal. The riots in Bombay lasted for nearly a month. In all more than three thousand people were killed (Chandra 611). Historian Ramchandra Guha opines that Bombay was the city worst affected. His references to attacks on Hindus on Mohammad Ali road and Jogeshwari and targeting of Muslims in Dharavi resemble the accounts in the novel (Guha 641-643). Pestonji's fears of the long-term impact of the riots have been widely echoed. Dileep Padgaonkar's book *When Bombay Burned* described Bombay as a permanently altered, deeply divided city at war with itself. Columnist Behram Contractor wrote, "the bigger tragedy...is...that...Bombay's reputation as a free-living and high-swinging city, absorbing people from all communities and all parts of India, is gone for ever" (qtd. in Guha 641-643).

Meher Pestonji's documentation of the Bombay riots stands out for its focus on the human angle, on the physical and psychological toll of the disaster. She also suggests from personal experience how traditionally subaltern groups and commoners can use ingenious methods to defeat opportunistic politicians and religious fanatics. The foregrounding of the positive contribution of civil society groups and non-government organisations in restoring harmony, the detailed and heartfelt rendering of the slums, the unsparing indictment of the failure of the Congress government which surrendered to anti-social elements, the bold exposure of the negative role of extremist regional political parties like the Shiv

Sena, impartial analysis of the role of the upper class and of the Parsi community, and the cathartic and electrifying depiction of Bombay fighting back and asserting its true ethos of universal harmony in the wake of the serial blasts – all these contribute to the uniqueness of Pestonji's narrative.

In the epilogue, even as India steps into the new millennium, Pestonji offers a bleak picture of the continuing fatal mingling of religion and politics, which retards national progress. She laments the near extinction of humaneness in a nation pervaded by the commercial, materialist, fiercely competitive spirit of Western globalization. According to economist Jayati Ghosh, the final thrust for the upsurge of communalism came from the cultural and economic crisis generated by globalisation. Contrary to expectations, globalisation based on the capitalist and colonial structures only made the rich, richer and the poor, poorer, creating deep and pervasive inequalities everywhere. The celebration of consumerist culture increased the discontent of the have-nots who sought refuge in a homogenous religious identity and directed their frustration against more vulnerable enemies at home, thus benefitting Hindutva politics immensely (Ghosh 107-130).

Pestonji's account of the 2002 Gujarat riots is emotional yet objective, resembling those of noted historians and journalists. Ever since the BJP government assumed power in Delhi in 1999, thousands of volunteers had been brought to Ayodhya to revive the Ram Temple issue. On 27 February 2002, the Sabarmati express full of volunteers returning from Ayodhya, halted at the Godhra station in Gujarat, where an altercation took place between passengers and Muslim vendors. Shortly after the train left the station, a bogey caught fire, killing fifty-eight volunteers. What followed was a systematic hunting down and annihilation of Muslim families, establishments and religious places by organised gangs of Hindu fundamentalists, involving arson, murder, rape and loot. The violence spread all over Gujarat and lasted for several months. The connivance of the BJP state government with the rioters invited scathing condemnation from the media, opposition parties, civilian groups and the international community. Even after a fragile peace was restored, the bleeding wounds of the impoverished, humiliated and terrorised victims were evident in the reports of the Supreme Court, the National Human Rights Commission, the Election Commission and other constitutional bodies, which found the Gujarat government guilty on numerous counts. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then Prime Minister of India, described the riots as a black mark on the nation's forehead which had lowered India's prestige in the world. Meher Pestonji accuses Chief Minister Narendra Modi and the government of

Gujarat of orchestrating an anti-Muslim genocide. Prof. Bipan Chandra writes, "...what distinguished the events of 2002 was that, unlike a typical riot situation in which two groups engage in, usually spontaneous violence, the assault was one-sided, pre-meditated, brutal, and supported or facilitated by the state" (Chandra 623). Pestonji also captures the efforts, rage and helplessness of secular groups and the belated yet strong reactions of the powerful. As historians observe, "The state government, police and bureaucracy connived or remained silent spectators while thousands of Muslims were murdered or hounded and made homeless. But then other segments of India's civil society and state institutions stood up and fought" (Chandra xii).

The Struggle for Harmony

Meher Pestonji's *Pervez* is her fictional autobiography, an attempt to retell national history from a feminine perspective. The protagonist represents those citizens who are disprivileged on account of their minority status or gender identity. It is the deeply moving saga of an ordinary woman who finds in her personal tragedies, the extraordinary strength to bring about positive social change. It is based on Pestonji's experiences as a journalist and social activist in Bombay of the nineties, especially her involvement with the slum-dwellers of Dharavi and anti-communalism campaigns. It draws on her extensive interviews with riot-victims and is dedicated to those who showed exemplary courage in restoring communal harmony and accompanied her to riot-hit areas. *Pervez* is a thought-provoking work by a self-confessed rebel who sensitively criticizes public omissions and commissions, hoping that Indians find an antidote to communalism. The epigraph of the novel salutes the defiant spirit of ordinary Indians struggling for peace, progress and justice in the face of onslaughts by dark forces:

"Throughout the monsoon there'll be
Brave fisher folk battling the sea

Defying each storm
To take a catch home

They're a part of
the rhythm of
the sea."

4.3. David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007)

Born in 1958 in Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, David Davidar graduated from Madras Christian College. In the eighties and nineties, he worked as journalist and columnist for *Himmat*, *Keynote* and *Gentleman* magazines and the *Hindu* newspaper. In 1985, after obtaining his diploma in publishing from Harvard, Davidar joined Penguin publishers as one of the founder members of Penguin India. He edited and published several famous authors including Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Khushwant Singh, Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie. Moving to Penguin Canada in 2004, he published Philip Roth, Khaled Hosseini, Nadine Gordimer, Amitav Ghosh and others. In 2010 he returned to India to co-found Aleph Book Company in partnership with Rupa Publications India. David Davidar has authored numerous articles, book reviews, poems and short stories. His novels grapple with the vastness and complexity of India. His debut novel *The House of Blue Mangoes* (2002) is a grand narrative covering fifty years of south Indian history. An international best-seller, it was published in translation in sixteen countries. His second novel *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007) was short-listed for a regional Commonwealth Writers Prize. His third novel *Ithaca* (2011) is set in the world of international publishing.

David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* documents India of the nineties marked by economic liberation and by communal violence stemming from the Ram Temple versus Babri Mosque dispute in Ayodhya. A novel in two parts, it expresses anguish and outrage at extremism and fanaticism, and calls for a return to the secular, pluralistic heritage of India and the ideals of the freedom struggle. It exhorts the new generation to embrace a deeper vision of life and thereby cultivate tolerance and understanding –

> "We do not know what to do with one of our most precious resources, solitude, and so we fill it with noise and clutter." (p.204)

Jai Arjun Singh describes *The Solitude of Emperors* as an earnest book of big ideas, wherein Davidar has taken the risk of offering a message regarding burning issues (Singh 8).

Heroes in Bombay and in Meham

The prologue to *The Solitude of Emperors* reveals that the novel focuses on the complex relationship between individual and society,

citizen and state, between commoners and the mighty currents of history. The novel opens with these lines:

> "They are the invisible ones, the ones who were too small, weak, poor or slow to escape the onrush of history. No obituaries mark their passing, no memorials honour their name and we don't remember them because in our eyes they never existed. Yet we ignore them at our peril, if only because their fate today could be ours tomorrow; history is an insatiable tyrant." (p.3)

The Solitude of Emperors is the story of Vijay, a journalist, whose destiny is shaped by larger national forces, who becomes part of the story he is covering, with disastrous consequences. The narrative begins with Vijay paying reverential homage to his beloved friend Noah. He has written a book about the life and death of Noah, impartially recording the history of the subaltern which is usually falsified or overlooked in official government records.

The actual story, told in flashback, begins in Vijay's small hometown in Tamil Nadu. He is desperate to escape its stagnant life. In the early 1990s, the family servant Raju is recruited by a Hindu right-wing organization during the Ayodhya movement. Urged by his father, young Vijay writes an article about the increasing power of sectarian politicians and sends it to the *Indian Secularist*, leading to his employment as a journalist by this small Bombay-based magazine. The over twenty years old *Indian Secularist* symbolizes the conscientious citizen's war against unscrupulous leaders. It breaks no sensational stories and is printed on cheap paper but is admired for its informed and thought-provoking exposure of sectarian politics. In Bombay, eighty-three year old Rustom Sorabjee, the inspirational founder-editor of the magazine enlightens Vijay about the insidious politicisation and perversion of religious faith in India. He describes the communal hatred of the 1990s as the worst since Partition –

> "...I have rarely despaired as much about the country's future. ...communalism seems to have become an everyday thing." (p.23)

Yet, in the disgust of youth like Vijay with national politics, Sorabjee sees a ray of hope. He believes in truthfulness and in a nurturing, liberating faith that is never malicious. He appreciates the rich version of secularism enshrined in the Indian Constitution -

> "We practise secularism in the Indian sense .... while we remain true to our faith we tolerate every other faith...." (p.27)

Working for the *Indian Secularist*, Vijay falls in love with the raw energy of Bombay and learns to study and appreciate the greatness of India's diverse religions and cultures.

Vijay's idyllic life is disrupted by the 1992-1993 riots. Bombay turns into a city of fear after the Babri Mosque is demolished by Hindu fundamentalists. Vijay recalls,

> "I and all the other inhabitants of the city were about to see our world rearranged in a way that would drive everything but fear from our minds.... a long comet's tail of violence swung across the country...tens of thousands...were affected... no one was spared in an orgy of violence...unlike anything the city had ever seen. To make matters worse...the police either looked the other way or even encouraged the rioters...it was in December 1992 that Bombay lost its way. " (p.41, 43)

The *Indian Secularist* terms it the fourth greatest tragedy to befall independent India since the Partition riots, the assassination of Gandhiji and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. It puts out a special issue decrying the Babri demolition and the riots engineered by the Hindu right-wing to gain political power. Vijay is desolate as he witnesses struggling immigrants to Bombay being butchered in the name of religion. As his frustration deepens, he seeks to get to the roots of the malaise. He does the unthinkable by going out to see a riot. He imagines writing an award-winning article anchored by the words of a dying riot victim. He witnesses horrible scenes of murder and arson and is spared only because of his sacred thread. For nearly two months, he is treated for physical and mental trauma, even as a second wave of violence erupts. He then joins his colleagues in collecting information to honour the forgotten dead.

The staff of the *Indian Secularist* contribute actively to restoring peace. However, they are shaken by the retributive bomb blasts planned by the Muslim underworld in March 1993. Vijay quails at the endless violence threatening the very existence of India. As he visits the blast sites, he is filled with rage and grief. Even Sorabjee despairs if a small secularist minority could defeat mighty forces destroying Indian pluralism. However, he vows,

> "...if there is even one person left in the country to whom our message will make a difference, that person is the reason we will keep going." (p.59)

Finally, a fragile peace is restored. A year after the Babri demolition, the prayers of the tense citizens are answered. The *Indian Secularist* and numerous others join in investigating the catastrophe and doing their best

to heal the wounds. Vijay retrospects over how one of India's most secular cities had been changed forever. He laments,

> "...Bombay ..... was broken, its industriousness and resilience a sham, a thin veil that covered the deep-seated fear and suspicion...Bombay would live and die on its streets ... even as they went about their daily lives its millions...wondered if they would be expected to sacrifice themselves for their city" (p.59)

To recover from the shock of the riots, Vijay is sent by Mr. Sorabjee in December 1993 to Meham - a small town in the Nilgiri mountains in the south. The riots lead Mr. Sorabjee to revive his idea of a book for the youth titled *The Solitude of Emperors: Why Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi Matter to Us Today?* Vijay is asked to review the manuscript. Unfortunately, the national unrest has reached Meham. A shrine called the Tower of God is made the object of dispute by a Bombay politician. Vijay's assignment is to write a report on the situation.

Mr. Sorabjee's book mouths Davidar's philosophy of secularism and forms the crux of the novel. It is inspired by Indian thinker and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's views. The first chapter 'The Need for Emperors' analyses how deeply Indians believe in their gods. However in crisis, people start exhibiting savage religious tendencies. Such communal violence had been defeated by Indian freedom-fighters who believed that –

> "India had always been the most plural of countries, a country that contained the world....central Asian tribes, Mongol warlords, Portuguese adventurers, Arabian seamen, Chinese travellers, Buddhist princes, Jewish wanderers, British traders, Christian apostles, Macedonian soldiers..." (p.75)

Yet, when large numbers suffer poverty and a few enjoy unimaginable riches, politicians and rabble-rousers inflame the passions of have-nots. They cleverly convince people that religious fanaticism offers security. Their slogans delude masses who, instead of battling poverty and corruption, turn upon each other. Hence the need for leaders of true faith –

> "What we need is an emperor of men, someone who is so strong, commanding, brilliant, secular, compassionate and valorous that the forces of darkness will shrink back, powerless to stop his onslaught." (p.79)

Only three figures in Indian history have played this role –

> "Ashoka, the Emperor of Renunciation; Akbar, the Emperor of Faith; and Gandhi, the Emperor of Truth." (p.79)

They are men for all ages. They were deeply religious yet secular and dealt with religious conflict without losing their faith. Such leaders are vital, for, no atheist or agnostic can have an enduring vision for India.

The second chapter is about 'Samraat Ashoka, the Emperor of Renunciation', whose name shines like a star in the annals of world history. The terrible bloodshed in the Kalinga war resulted in the conversion of Emperor Ashoka. He renounced violence, embraced Buddhism and devoted himself to public welfare. Though a staunch Buddhist, he commanded that no man's faith be interfered with. He issued edicts exhorting each citizen not to glorify his own religion or to condemn the religion of another, but to learn about and honour all religions. Ashoka stands in sharp contrast to modern politicians-

> "Which leader today would consider giving up his power – no matter how paltry when compared to the absolute power someone like Ashoka would have commanded – and devoting his life to the welfare of the people? How many politicians had resigned because of the riots that had broken out in Bombay and elsewhere after the mosque in Ayodhya was destroyed? One? Shouldn't that make people angry, especially the young?" (p.100, 101)

The third chapter titled 'Shahenshah Akbar, Emperor of Faith' recaps the glorious reign of Mughal ruler Akbar. Though a Muslim, he took great interest in other faiths. He angered the orthodoxy by declaring all faiths to be true. He established the *Ibadat Khana* for inter-religious dialogue and a syncretic religion *Din-i-Ilahi* open to all. He was an Emperor of Faith who showed how faith could unite men, a man of God and a ruler of men, an emperor badly needed today. The fourth chapter is titled 'Mahatma Gandhi, Emperor of Truth'. He was not born to greatness but commanded millions. He was unambiguous about the need for India to be a harmoniously plural society, where people of all faiths lived peacefully. He was killed by a Hindu fanatic because of his beliefs. A pious Hindu, he used the philosophy of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha* (truth) to free India from British rule -

> "Therein lay his genius – articulating his strategies for winning freedom and maintaining the secularism of the nation through the medium of his faith." (p.169)

Sadly, today, Gandhiji's message is forgotten or mocked at.

The concluding chapter - 'The Solitude of Emperors' presents contemplation as the solution to religious fundamentalism. During crises, great men like Gandhi, Akbar and Ashoka derived strength and wisdom from introspection in solitude. Youth are exhorted to look within themselves and find direction through discipline and fortitude, to inhale the genius of India, to learn about her amazing beauty and diversity. They are further instructed –

> "At the same time, do not neglect to absorb the poverty and violence and savagery and injustice of this country of extremes. Experience the despair of the coalminer in Dhanbad, where the very land is on fire, understand the hopelessness of the marginal cotton farmer in Andhra Pradesh, mourn with the widow of the Sikh garage owner who witnessed her husband being burnt alive in the Delhi riots of 1984. Let their pain become yours." (p.210)

From this realization should come the passion to uplift the nation. The youth are called 'Emperors of Everyday' and urged to act courageously to defeat communalism, to selflessly dedicate themselves to tolerance and equality. By emulating great souls, one of them might emerge as the Emperor who will redeem India. Sorabjee's book concludes with this line-

> "The new emperor...will need to combine the renunciation of Ashoka, the syncretic abilities of Akbar and the truth of Gandhi..... He will need to add something...uniquely his own, for the problems of our time are more complex ..... he will have a vision so breathtakingly clear and innovative that it may not even be recognized immediately..." (p. 208)

Even as Vijay reads the manuscript of Mr. Sorabjee's book, communal tensions overshadow the beautiful hill-station of Meham, one of the numerous after-shocks of the demolition of the Babri Mosque. The prominent citizens of Meham are retired government and army officers whose lives revolve around clubs and gardens. On the highest peak in Meham stands an ancient, miraculous Christian shrine, visited by people of all faiths. Called 'The Tower of God', it is mostly inaccessible due to rough weather and the risky climb on slippery stone steps. In Meham, Vijay befriends Noah, a socially ostracised young poet living in the local graveyard as its keeper. He is the rebellious mocker of the elite, friend of the poor, the humane philosopher of Meham. As Noah and Vijay become close friends, communal trouble starts brewing. Hindu radicalists led by right-wing politician Rajan claim that the Tower of God was an ancient Shiva temple, stealthily usurped by Christians.

Aware of Rajan's plans to gain political mileage by engineering riots, Vijay sets out to preserve the secular fabric. His risky intervention leads to unforeseen consequences. Despite knowing that he is no match for the sly and powerful Rajan, he decides to confront him. With Noah's help he alerts local officials, police and influential citizens. But his warnings are ignored. Finally, Vijay interviews Rajan, the Bombay businessman turned politician. He is a self-made man, a popular philanthropist and charismatic leader, rising from being a vagabond in Meham to a multi-millionaire. But, Vijay's probing questions reveal that he is a bitter man seeking to avenge the humiliation of his family by the upper class. His wrath finds outlet in religious fundamentalism and he is allegedly involved in the Bombay riots. He symbolizes the dangerously rotten political culture of contemporary India. Even as Rajan plans a riot to take over the shrine with the connivance of the police, Vijay finds himself fighting a losing battle. The local officials are apathetic and the police threaten to arrest Vijay for troubling Rajan. On the other side stands Brother Ahimas, the old caretaker of the shrine. A holy man, he refuses to organize resistance or request protection and is reconciled to divine will. Helpless, Vijay urges Noah to 'do' something. Vijay is frantic because he can clearly visualize Meham spattered with innocent blood but cannot even organize a peace march. When Noah refuses to intervene, he loses his composure and Noah is cut to the core by his harsh words. Though they part in anger, the god within Noah finally awakens. Inspired by Mr. Sorabjee's book, Vijay decides to fight all alone.

On 5 January 1994, members of the Hindu right-wing Kadavul Katchi party gather at the base of the Tower of God, scared to ascend the peak in misty weather. Rajan proceeds alone on his mission to convert the shrine into a temple with the help of his ferocious rioters. But Noah, along with the small band of youth defending the shrine, lies in wait. When Rajan ascends the slippery steps, planning to secretly install a *lingam* at the shrine to prove that it had been a Hindu temple, Noah confronts him. They wrestle and fall to their deaths in the deep valley below. Ultimately, good triumphs over evil, but as in a Shakespearean tragedy, good is destroyed along with evil. Only Rajan's shattered body is recovered. Noah's ripped shirt is buried by close friends. He becomes a martyr for secularism, averting the massacre of innocents and preventing communal hatred from taking root. His sacrifice goes unrecognized but Vijay bears witness to how the social outcaste became a saviour.

Guilty about Noah's death, Vijay despairs at the state of India. He is comforted by Mr. Sorabjee who praises Noah as the heroic Emperor of Everyday and Vijay as the catalyst that led him to his true mission.

Ironically, both Noah and Vijay, for their own reasons, keep aloof from religion. Yet both embody true religion. Vijay leaves for Canada. Here he pens the story of Noah. Noah's end becomes the defining moment of his life. After a decade of isolation, Vijay thinks of returning to India to take up his unfulfilled mission of promoting secularism.

Salvaging A Fragmented Nation

The *Solitude of Emperors* is set in Bombay and in the Nilgiris during 1991-1994. The story begins in Vijay's hometown in Tamil Nadu. It is a microcosm of India in the nineties - teeming with backward towns and villages, yet on the way to massive urbanization and globalization. Vijay symbolizes educated, unemployed rural youth, frustrated by socialist edifices, casteism and religious segregation and eager to escape to the freedom of metropolises. Since his educated parents are ostracised for their revolutionary step of marrying across the caste-divide, Vijay inherits their grouse towards caste and religious divides. In Vijay's nondescript town, the swift percolation of communal politics throughout India is reflected by the recruitment of impoverished youth by fundamentalists. The commoners are perplexed by the extremist movement to demolish the Babri Mosque and build a Ram Temple in Ayodhya because,

> "....it seemed calculated to bring ordinary Hindus out on to the streets to avenge themselves on their Muslim neighbours for a centuries-old insult that neither party had had anything to do with." (p.16)

Many educated middle-class professionals like Vijay's father explode in anger -

> "Abominable...These people are giving...us Hindus a bad name." (p.17)

National media, busy reporting the communal disturbances along the route of right-wing BJP leader Advani's *Rath Yatra*, neglects the dangers emerging elsewhere in the country.

In Bombay where protagonist Vijay joins the newspaper run by committed secularist Rustom Sorabjee, Davidar delves further into the explosive national situation. He depicts the charm of old world Bombay, only to contrast it later with the pathos of the 1992 riots. The scale of the violence is unprecedented. Fundamentalists and fanatics rip the social fabric. Friends and neighbours become enemies and traitors. It becomes hard to distinguish between victims and perpetrators. Panic and rumours rule the roost. The early temptations of Vijay point to how most media

persons succumb to sensationalism in reporting the riots. The elites party nonchalantly until rioters reach their doorstep. Davidar also recounts the peace efforts of citizens. The shattering effect of the serial bomb blasts and the valiant response to it are recorded. The novelist emphasizes two contradictory aspects– the resilience of the masses and the bitter truth that there is no alternative other than endurance. As Vijay observes,

> "The trains and buses ran packed to capacity every day, office workers and mill hands and shoppers and hawkers...went about their daily routine, but it was only because they had no option but to go to work in order to feed their families; they did not have the luxury of staying at home and building bomb shelters and stocking them with ....grapefruit juice and low-fat yogurts as their counterparts in a Western city might have done." (p.59)

The after-shocks of the 1992-93 riots reverberate all over India. When, scarred by the Bombay riots, Vijay goes for a holiday to the southern hill-station of Meham, the spectre of communalism returns to haunt him. Here, against the backdrop of growing inter-religious tensions, Vijay starts proof-reading the manuscript of his editor Rustom Sorabjee's textbook meant to inculcate patriotism, secularism and tolerance among youngsters. This inspiring book serves to affirm the all-inclusive nature of Indian civilization by tracing the glorious history of Indian secularism. It traces the root causes of the upsurge of communalism in the nineties and offers a vital vision for the nation's future.

Meham exemplifies how religious intolerance was fuelled by economic crisis in the early nineties. A squalid town, it is an ideal breeding ground for communalism. Behind the deceptive peace is the massive divide between haves and have-nots. Places of worship and unemployed, frustrated youth abound. Davidar also suggests that the rise of communalism in South Indian towns like Meham was part of the fundamentalist agenda to spread their poison beyond the North. Since the 1980s, Hindu extremists had circulated lists of minority holy places that had allegedly belonged to the majority. The three hundred year old Tower of God, a confluence of myth and history, stands on the thin dividing line between faith and fanaticism. The shrine which houses the relics of two Christian martyrs, is popular for its miracles among people of all faiths. In 1992, encouraged by the demolition of the Babri Mosque, the local MLA with a band of hooligans had marched against the shrine, reviving an old rumour that the shrine had originally been a Hindu temple. The police inspector who had dealt toughly with them was transferred. On the first anniversary of the Babri

demolition, the right-wing party Kadavul Katchi revives the agitation, led by local politician Rajan who aims to rise to power with Hindu votes.

Rajan personifies the suave new-age fundamentalist politician, the engine driving the juggernaut of communalism. He hides behind an impenetrable mask of public service. In reality, he uses religion for personal aggrandizement. He embodies the Hindutva doctrine of the nineties which sought to give India a singular Hindu identity by subduing all minority groups. Davidar terms its practitioners as traitors. As Vijay tells Rajan,

> "You claim to be a patriot who is prepared to die for his country, but you do not seem to mind killing your own. ..... No country which targets its own people has ever prospered.... Most fundamentalist regimes have fallen sooner or later, after creating fear and mistrust, and ruining their countries. " (p. 177 - 179)

Ultimately, Rajan too is depicted as a product of the anger of the have-nots. He can never forget his millworker father who had worked meekly all his life only to die starving, humiliated and anguished, leaving Rajan to fend for the family. Rajan says of his father,

> "In him I saw the silent, voiceless, powerless face of the majority... That is the power we are about to unleash, the energy of the majority, the hundreds of millions without dreams or any means of rising above their dismal lives." (p.183)

Rajan's real motivation to attack the Christian shrine is that years ago, a Christian boss had unjustly dismissed him from his job, when he was struggling to support his family. Shocked by Rajan's deadly mission of making India a Hindu dictatorship, Vijay warns him that this would unleash endless war. But Rajan calls Vijay an 'English speaking pseudo-secularist'. Rajan's supporters are prepared to continue the religious battle indefinitely. This politics of personal vendetta, of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric was the hallmark of right-wing parties that came to power in the late 1990s. Devoted secularists were unevenly matched against fanatic mobs with time and resources, who exploited the fury of the dispossessed.

On the other hand, Davidar criticises the pathetic ignorance and unpardonable inaction of the elite which helps the unhindered rise of fundamentalism. In Meham, retired army officers, scientists and businessmen, addicted to colonial lifestyles, cocooned in clubs, devote all their energies to winning flower-shows. They are happily oblivious to the rage

simmering in the debt-ridden, landless peasants, in the unemployed who have no avenues left after the collapse of the tea business. The blinkered vision of the administrative machinery is also decried. Vijay who knows the workings of sectarian politics is so frustrated that he briefly contemplates eliminating Rajan. While Meham's elite, instead of trying to prevent violence, think of calling out the army if needed, Vijay muses,

> "....I could see myself interviewing the survivors and victims of communal violence, people who had been leading normal, boring lives, until, in an instant, things had swung out of control. I had interviewed the murderers too, and besides a few obvious goondas, the majority of them were ordinary men, fathers, sons, husbands, who were perfectly good neighbours and citizens until some politician or ambitious priest invoked the name of God." (p. 195)

Meham finally becomes a mini replica of Ayodhya. Trusting the unscrupulous politician Rajan, the administration claims to be prepared. However, no action is taken when members of his rally resort to violence. The police machinery, bribed by Rajan, pretends to arrest him. The role of civil society is underlined in the relentless efforts of Vijay and his supporters, and their moulding of Noah into a weapon against communal politics. It is the rejected subaltern Noah who finally saves the situation. The press is satirized. Noah's greatness remains unknown and very few newspapers report the events in Meham. Those that do, mourn the demise of Rajan, describing him as one of the most dynamic, young leaders of the region.

Post-colonial issues also find place in *The Solitude of Emperors*. Albeit indirectly, the novel suggests that seeds of communalism were sown by colonisers. The history of Meham's shrine, wherein the British collector had complicated the religious dispute by appeasing all communities, proves this. More significantly, Rustom Sorabjee's textbook on secularism negates the colonial view of Indian history as one filled with religious conflicts. It asserts how religious tolerance is encoded in the everyday life of all faiths in India, by demonstrating how Ashoka based his tolerance on Buddhism, Akbar on Islam and Gandhiji on Hinduism.

Characterisation, Passion, The Spirit of a Place

The Solitude of Emperors has a simple, well-knit plot. Davidar portrays with equal finesse the vast canvas of national events and the inner life of individuals. The conflict between good and evil, secularism and communalism is resolved in a most unexpected fashion, by a least expected hero - Noah.

The characterisation shows a sense of human complexity, transcending easy compartmentalisations of people (Singh 8). The characters of Noah, Mr. Sorabjee and Rajan are etched painstakingly. Noah is an enigmatic figure, striking in both life and death. The protagonist Vijay is endearing, though at times, he becomes the author's mouthpiece. The lucid first-person narration evokes a poetic feel. The functional journalistic prose and brisk colloquial narrative achieves eloquence in descriptions of natural scenery. Davidar creates lasting impressions of the sights, sounds and smells of India.

In the part set in the great city of Bombay, Davidar narrates nineties India with its socio-political contradictions, old world charm, tryst with globalization, its changing ethos. He sketches a realistic picture of Bombay where freedom, opportunity and challenge blend into a pulsating rhythm and each one must make his own destiny. Davidar brings together the most disparate Indians in the fight against communalism – Vijay a young, traditional Tamil Brahmin and Sorabjee an old, Westernized Parsi, showcasing the diversity of India -

> "....the core of the battle we're fighting is this: the fundamentalists have always sought to pare people down to...their religious identity, and...exclude everything else.... each of us contains worlds within us; we are so multi-faceted that we will not be put into little boxes, segregated and turned against one another." (p. 26, 27)

The thought-provoking account of the riots profiles the psychopathology of communalists. The pathos is all-encompassing. The narration climaxes on the night when Vijay roams the riot-hit streets. The thrill soon turns to horror as he stumbles on a mutilated corpse and witnesses rioters acting with diabolic nonchalance and impersonal fury, tearing out the innards of one man and beheading another. Vijay is attacked and humiliated. When he is assaulted by a poor man of his own community, he realises that the real motivation for violence is not religion but the humiliation suffered by the poor. Nevertheless, the steadfastness, selflessness and courage of anti-communalists remain a beacon of hope.

The terse narrative finds a spirit of liberation in Meham. Davidar transports his readers to the pristine beauty of the Nilgiris, Ooty and Coonoor. He is at his eloquent best in Sorabjee's manuscript on secularism, making Indian history appealing to young minds. The entry of Noah, more ethereal than human, opens up a world of fantasy. Named Noah after the righteous Biblical figure whose ark saves creation from extinction, he lives like Lord Shiva the destroyer, in a burial ground, isolating himself. He stands for the death of the old order and the birth of a

new one. Cynical about religion and tradition, he values truth, beauty, love and liberty. Though a perpetual drifter, his end makes him far superior to those with jobs and missions. His character goes beyond religion to true spirituality.

Throughout the novel is the interplay of human passions with national destiny. Whenever Vijay is tempted to stay away from the dangerous situation in Meham, the passionate memory of the 1992 riots spurs him on. Rajan's radicalism is rooted in passions stoked by injustice. Again, a passionate war of words leads Noah to do the unthinkable. A sense of fate pervades the entire novel. The foreboding is strong on the last evenings when Noah and Vijay discuss death. Destiny leads Vijay to the conflict he both wants to escape and is obsessed with. He cannot forgive himself for inspiring Noah to become a martyr. He cannot reconcile himself to the fact that God should allow the good to be sacrificed in order to annihilate the evil. He begins to abhor the very idea of religion -

> "It is a story that stretches back centuries...of sultans, soldiers, saints and ordinary men who felt the dead weight of God in their bones, urging them on to acts of folly.... .... under the gaze of an indifferent God, heedless to the passion and tragedy of the men who sacrificed themselves in his name. Noah and Rajan were only the latest victims but there would be...many more, who would perish.....at many other places of worship in this land corroded by religion." (p.232, 233)

The novel ends with a beautiful tribute to Noah's sad life, to humanity, meditating on the purpose of life and the immortal soul that flies through eternity negotiating life and death –

> "...while most of us, after a period of youthful rebellion....devote ourselves to burrowing into society, building safety nets, surrounding ourselves with barricades like family and possessions against the unsettling nature of life, mavericks such as Noah retain the lightness of unburdened youth...that enables them to soar up ... and perform feats that we would find impossible. Our role...was to provide the springboard, usually unbeknown to ourselves. .....it is only when people close to us die that we begin to learn how to live ... the one who has passed on fuses with us, and we become a different person altogether. It is a condition of life that our beloved dead will never be forgotten." (p. 244)

Critical Review

The Solitude of Emperors pits the dehumanising communal politics of the nineties against the modern educated youth of India. On the one hand,

if unemployed and frustrated youth are recruited by fundamentalist organisations, there are also enlightened youth like Vijay who oppose divisive forces. David Davidar reiterates the need to educate the young against intolerant forces which seek to destroy the pluralistic heritage of India for vested interests. Vijay's secular education begins at home. His parents are teachers who seek to transcend the unjust divisions of caste and religion. His father's social consciousness inspires him to choose journalism as his profession. Vijay is shaped into a fine journalist by the wonderful atmosphere at the *Indian Secularist*. His editor Rustom Sorabjee educates him about the role of secularism in Indian democracy and the dangers of mixing religion and politics. Vijay and his fellow-journalists play a sterling role in bringing solace to riot-hit Bombay. They fight a lonely battle against mighty communal forces. All this suggests the need to recognize the role of youth in nation- building. This theme finds its fullest expression in the ending of the novel. Inspired by Vijay's earnest efforts, young Noah sacrifices himself for the cause of peace and harmony.

The idea of moulding the young into ideal citizens is highlighted in Sorabjee's book. Secularism is placed firmly within the Indian tradition through this book within the novel. It emphasizes the need to educate youngsters about national issues since young minds can become easy prey for fundamentalists or can be moulded into mighty positive forces. About these didactic essays in the novel Davidar says, "It was a deliberate decision to do it that way. Sorabjee makes it clear to Vijay that he is writing the essays for a teenage audience, making it as simple as possible for them to understand and be inspired by the lives of ... great men" (Singh 8). Davidar's fascinating thesis which brings together Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi, explains his approach to the national situation in the 1990s, to the roles of state and citizen, and to secularism and communalism in Indian polity. He presents the ideal ruler India badly needs by portraying three great paragons - Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi.

Sorabjee's textbook has been deeply influenced by the ideas in Amartya Sen's landmark works - *The Argumentative Indian* and *Identity and Violence.* Sen argues that democracy and secularism are not gifts of the West to India. India's ancient tradition of argumentation and heterodoxy contradicts the narrow Hindutva view of Indian civilization. A true study of Indian history shows that the inherently multicultural and multi-religious essence of India has extended since Vedic times and found support in modern leaders like Gandhi and Tagore. India's secular, socialist democracy is rooted in dialogue, public reasoning and critique. Orientalists project a false view of Indian culture as unreasoning. To quote Amartya Sen, "It was indeed a Buddhist emperor of India, Ashoka, who,

in the third century BCE, not only outlined the need for toleration and the richness of heterodoxy, but also laid down...the oldest rules for conducting debates and disputations, with the opponents being 'duly honoured in every way on all occasions'. ....the most powerful defence of toleration and of the need for the state to be equidistant from different religions came from a Muslim Indian emperor, Akbar..... in the 1590s ... when the Inquisition was in full swing in Europe (Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* xii-xiii).

Thus, Davidar's manuscript, by presenting Indian history as inherently plural and all-inclusive, challenges colonial ideas about the clash of religions and cultures in India. According to eminent historian Romila Thapar, orientalist scholars popularised the concept of conflicting Hindu and Muslim civilizations, thus generating harmful religious nationalisms. This religious concept of nation was taken up in the twentieth century. While Muslim fundamentalists demanded the separate Islamic nation of Pakistan, Hindu radicals tried to demarcate India as a Hindu nation victimized by non-Hindus. To quote Romila Thapar, "India's society has always been multi-religious, multicultural society where identities have inevitably been multiple....Our history in India has been very different from that projected in the two-nation theory and the Hindutva ideology. If we can read our history with more sensitivity and insight it would contribute to avoiding a fascist future" (Thapar 1-31).

As far as the depiction of the religious conflagration in Bombay is concerned, Davidar is realistic. He captures the human angle of divisive national politics. The fear, selfishness, endurance and resilience of the commoners are brought out. The emotional scars of the violence are indelible. While most people have no option but to continue living as before, there are a few noble souls who risk fighting anti-social elements and bring succour to victims. The second part of the novel set in Meham is significant for two reasons - one, it depicts the spread of northern communal politics into southern India; secondly, it presents social injustice as the source of religious fanaticism. According to Davidar, underdevelopment and the great chasm between haves and have-nots caused by the failure of the state machinery and exploited by political agents gives rise to communalism. Rajan, the local leader, epitomises the suave new-age politician who hides his selfish divisive agenda behind the mask of benevolence. The debate between Vijay and Rajan represents the national debate between secularists who advocate a plural identity for India and Hindutva ideologues who see India as a Hindu civilization and minorities as enemies. The Hindu-Christian conflict mirrors the violent anti-conversion campaign unleashed by radical Hindu groups against the

Christian community in several parts of India. Regarding the depiction of inter-religious tensions in Meham, G.J.V. Prasad writes, "David Davidar does get the politics of hill station India right ... he knows a lot of what he is talking about" (Prasad 9).

In both parts of *The Solitude of Emperors* set in Bombay and in Meham, David Davidar strongly condemns civil society when it fails to oppose communal politics. Eternal vigilance is the constant refrain in the novel. Right from the time Vijay begins his journalistic journey in his small town to the time he learns the ropes of the trade in the cauldron of riot-hit Bombay and finally when Vijay crosses his limits as a journalist to become a crusader against extremist forces in Meham, Davidar expresses strong views about ethical journalism and the national role of the media. While he castigates commercialised mainstream media for succumbing to sensationalism without principles or vision, he lauds alternative media like the *Indian Secularist* which continue a selfless campaign to preserve peace and unity. According to senior journalist Siddharth Varadarajan, the Indian press has internalized the communal logic to such an extent that most of its news reporting and analysis suffers from an undercurrent of sectarian bias. Its vocabulary is replete with communal clichés and stereotypes. Those elements in the media who are committed to secularism and expose how riots are engineered, function under severe threat and are neither supported nor protected by the government (Varadarajan 160-229). Davidar also condemns the uncondonable ignorance, apathy and selfish inaction of the educated middle class, the elite, the police and bureaucracy which give a free hand to fundamentalist politicians and their mercenaries. The precarious situation in Meham when Rajan plans to turn a Christian shrine into a Hindu temple, almost becomes a replica of the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. In both instances, the administration acts in an eerily similar manner - lethargic, irresponsible, and partial to powerful politicians. Ironically, the Justice Liberhan Commission took seventeen years to report on the 1992 Babri demolition and today the guilty are yet to be brought to justice.

Finally, David Davidar convinces the reader with his arguments in favour of a multi-religious and multi-cultural India, where tolerance, peaceful debate, respect for all, openness to diversity, understanding and harmony flourish. He asserts that communal violence engineered by calculating politicians and holy men is 'the' greatest danger to free India and is to be fought with truth and non-violence. While explaining the idea of the secular state in the Indian Constitution, he distinguishes between the Indian and Western notions of secularism-

> "The Western interpretation of secularism is the strict separation of Church and State, but that would never have worked in this country, where religion permeates every aspect of daily life, our founding fathers took it to mean an even-handedness or neutrality towards all faiths." (p.27)

In India, secularism evolved from the struggle of nationalist forces against communal forces, unlike the West where it was the outcome of the struggle between Church and State. According to Pandit Nehru, "It does not obviously mean a society where religion itself is discouraged.....It means free play for all religions, subject only to their not interfering with each other or with the basic conceptions of our State." Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan regarded this definition of secularism to be in accordance with the ancient religious tradition of India (qtd. in Chandra 60). Jai Arjun Singh observes, "At a time when intellectuals are becoming increasingly cynical...about religion, Davidar has the gumption to argue that discarding religion altogether can never be a practical...solution for a country like India...the Indian interpretation of secularism has to remain different from that in the West" (Singh 8). In the final analysis, Davidar holds that no religion is greater than humanity.

A Roadmap for the Nation

The Solitude of Emperors is a perceptive book about modern India and has clear directions and ideals at its core. It challenges Indians to confront themselves in solitude, recognize the dangers of narrow-minded nationalism and fundamentalist beliefs, and become actively involved in preserving the harmony of a divided nation. For Davidar, the three greatest Indians are Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi because they possessed a soaring vision for India that transcended caste and creed. Even the epigraph of the novel taken from the Indian saint-poet Kabir underlines this spirit of liberation and all-embracing inclusiveness –

> "The one who stays within the limits assigned to him is a man
> The one who roams beyond these limits is a saint.
>
> To reject both limits and their absence:
> that's a thought with immeasurable depths.
> -Kabir"

4.4. Resolving the Nineties Dilemma

Meher Pestonji's *Pervez- A Novel* and David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* highlight vital dimensions of personal and national destinies in the 1990s. Firstly, they chronicle the tussle between secularism and communalism. The incredible diversity of India led Winston Churchill to remark, "India is no more a single country than the equator." According to Rabindranath Tagore, a 'unity of spirit' has knit India together despite immense diversities. The Indian people set out to build a plural, secular nation-state. However communal politics arose powerfully after the late eighties due to economic inequalities, loss of ethics, commercialisation, end of political idealism and lack of a unifying national vision. Though the good sense of the Indian people has asserted itself over communal passions, conflict and persecution in the name of religion continues. As Romila Thapar opines, "The history of the twentieth century in the subcontinent will be remembered.....for the rise of communal ideologies into a position of prominence in national politics" (Thapar 1).

Secondly, since both Pestonji and Davidar have a journalistic background, their accounts of the 1992-93 Bombay riots have striking resemblances. Their multi-dimensional narratives correspond to the official report of the Justice B.N. Srikrishna Committee on communal violence in Bombay, submitted in 1998. Thirdly, they portray communal violence as more of an urban phenomenon. In the nineties, economic liberalization and globalization had created a new upper class. However, lopsided development led to migration from villages to cities and expansion of slums. The frustration of the have-nots and jobless youth made them easy recruits for power-hungry politicians and criminal gangs who incited communal violence. Ironically, religious and ethnic riots became one of the most secularized areas wherein money, politics and organized interests played a more important part than religious passions.

Fourthly, the role of the state is critiqued. The novels are suggestive of how 'fragile' the concept of nation is and how the seeds of communal hatred sown by British colonisers flourish at the hands of the ruling elite today. They condemn the laxity of government apparatuses in countering communal violence, especially the overt or covert communal tendencies of the police and bureaucracy. They expose the political opportunism which has made communal parties an integral part of electoral politics. Though Indian polity and society still remain basically secular, the intrusion of religion into state affairs and vice-versa is undesirable. Fifthly, the role of the citizen is analysed. Through Pervez in *Pervez-A Novel* and Noah in *The Solitude of Emperors*, the subaltern finally speaks. The subalterns

experience inner transformation as they come to the national centrestage. When governance fails, they redeem the nation. In Pestonji's novel, Pervez, a divorced housewife from a minority community, encouraged by her friends, becomes an activist against communal politics. In Davidar's novel, the protagonist Vijay inspires Noah the penniless vagabond and social outcaste to become a heroic figure by sacrificing his life to preserve peace. At the same time, both Pestonji and Davidar criticise civil society which fails to act decisively against radical elements.

Above all, *Pervez- A Novel* and *The Solitude of Emperors* include themes of universal significance. They suggest that India has to lead the world by an exemplary model of pluralism. India can never be co-terminus with one religion or culture. Both Tagore and Gandhi opposed the viewing of the nation and humanity at large through the narrow prism of religions or ethnicities. Unless the world recognizes the constantly overlapping pluralities of human identity, there is bound to be disarray and terror.

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CHAPTER V

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY INDIA: THE WIDER CANVAS POST-2000

(ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*, VIKAS SWARUP'S *Q&A* AND *SIX SUSPECTS*, AND TARUN TEJPAL'S *THE STORY OF MY ASSASSINS*)

Those who take the meat from the table teach contentment. Those for whom the taxes are destined demand sacrifice. Those who eat their fill speak to the hungry of the wonderful times to come. Those who lead the country into abyss call ruling too difficult for ordinary folk.
—Bertolt Brecht

5.1. From 2000 to date: Contemporary India

The dawn of the new millennium brought new hopes for India. The tenure of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee saw the rise of India as a nuclear power and information technology giant. While the nuclear blasts led to economic sanctions by the West, relations with neighbouring Pakistan deteriorated during the 1999 Kargil conflict and the attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. The victory in Kargil, the mature handling of tensions with Pakistan, the successful elections in militancy-ridden Kashmir in 2002 and improvement of relations with the USA were the achievements of the NDA. Unfortunately, Hindu radical organisations controlled the right-wing government and communal politics culminated in the Gujarat carnage of 2002. A series of corruption charges and scams rocked the ruling party. The NDA's 'India Shining' campaign failed to impress the masses suffering from divisive politics and growing economic disparities, and the NDA lost power in the 2004 elections.

The Congress led by Mrs. Sonia Gandhi formed the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government with economist Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister. The new government emphasized inclusive development, protection of minorities and women. A National Advisory Council of civil society activists and experts was formed to assist policy formulation. Other landmark steps included the Right to Information Act (2005), the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005) and the controversial Indo-US Nuclear Deal (2007) for meeting India's energy deficit. The economy grew at over eight percent, but increasing privatization and foreign investment meant neo-colonial capitalism and greater vulnerability to global economic crises. Rising economic inequality remained an area of concern.

In the 2009 elections, the UPA won a second term. While there were progressive legislations like The Right to Education Act (2009), there was also widespread economic disparity, imbalanced development, and conflicts between corporate or state projects and indigenous communities or environmental concerns. Maoist insurgency, atrocities against weaker sections and terrorist attacks emerged as disturbing trends. The central and state governments were implicated in massive scams. A fiery debate on the anti-corruption Lokpal Bill ensued between civil society and government. The demands of coalition politics led to a virtual 'policy paralysis'. Drastic steps were taken to boost foreign direct investment, even as commoners struggled with recession and rising prices.

2014 saw the dawn of a new age in Indian politics with the BJP winning a massive mandate and Narendra Modi rising to become the Prime Minister of India. Once ostracised for the 2002 Gujarat riots under his Chief Ministership, he is now the toast of the nation and the global community. He has unveiled ambitious plans for India in every sector from agriculture to industry, banking to foreign policy and cleanliness drives to yoga campaigns. The masses have been enamoured by his charisma, his rags to riches story and his eloquent oratory. The future remains to be seen as the nation treks ahead on an arduous path of progress, even as rising prices, unemployment, corruption, crime, violence and communalism linger menacingly in the background.

National concerns from 2000 to date have increasingly become part of recent Indian English fiction. This is reflected in Chetan Bhagat's bestselling novels – *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night at the Call Center* (2005), *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *Two States* (2009) and *Revolution 2020: Love, Corruption, Ambition* (2011). Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000) is a bureaucrat's satire on the Indian state and the conflict between the poor and the ruling

elite. Novels like Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005), Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006) refer to regional issues. Gita Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003) and *Fugitive Histories* (2009) deal with religious intolerance and riots. Glimpses of fast-changing India are afforded in Khushwant Singh's *The Sunset Club* (2010). Anita Desai's *Artist of Disappearance* (2011) dwells on modern culture conflicts, while in Namita Gokhale's *Priya: In Incredible Indyaa* (2011) the wife of a minister traces the life of the ruling elite. Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations* (2008) depicts the individual – nation interface against the socio-political backdrop of the late eighties to early nineties whereas his *Last Man in Tower* (2011) voices the woes of the Indian commoner pitted against capitalist globalization. Vikas Swarup's *The Accidental Apprentice* (2013) looks at the role and rise of the educated and empowered Indian woman on the national stage. There have also been myriad novels by writers like Vikram A.Chandra to Easterine Kire Iralu, Amish Tripathi to Suketa Mehta, from insurgency hit areas like Kashmir and the North-East, from spiritually rotten metropolises and from violence, caste and gender discrimination ridden rural regions – trying to reflect their turmoil and their heritage.

Popular fiction combining entertainment with serious social realism is being produced on an unprecedented scale in India today. This genre is well represented by remarkable novels such as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* (2005) and *Six Suspects* (2008) and Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* (2009). They are daring attempts to make sense of modern India - colossal, vibrant and chaotic. With surgical precision, brutally blunt honesty and dark yet humane humour, they lay bare twenty-first century India. Even as they reveal how the ruling elite subvert democracy, they testify to the heroic struggles of the subaltern.

5.2. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008)

Born in 1974 in Chennai to Kannadiga parents, Aravind Adiga was educated in Mangalore and Sydney. He studied English literature at Columbia University, New York and Magdalen College, Oxford. He worked as journalist with *Financial Times, Wall Street* and *TIME* magazines. He has also written for the *New Yorker, Independent* and *Sunday Times*. His debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008) won the Man Booker prize, which he dedicated to the national capital Delhi. His *Between the Assassinations* (2008) is a 'novel in stories' that portrays India between 1984 and 1991. Both *The White Tiger* and *Between the*

Assassinations were shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. His latest novel *Last Man in Tower (*2011) depicting Mumbai in the era of corporate globalisation has been widely acclaimed.

The White Tiger widely described as an explosive novel, consists of a series of letters written by the protagonist Balram Halwai, entrepreneur from Bangalore, to Chinese premier Wen Jiabao who is on a state visit to India. These imaginary letters which are the confessions of a murderer are in fact a brutal satire on new India. According to Robbie Goh, Balram Halwai recounts with chilling frankness, his tale of poverty and crime, of a village yokel who turns into a savvy businessman through ruthless ambition. He is the blunt spokesperson of India's Everyman (Goh 327-344). Neel Mukherjee describing the novel as savage and brilliant, writes, "Gridlocked in corruption, greed, inhumanity and absolute inequality...this India is unredemptive. What Adiga lifts the lid on is also inexorably true: not a single detail in this novel rings false or feels confected..." (qtd. in Choubey 54).

Explosive Epistles

The epistolary plot of *The White Tiger* is divided into eight parts corresponding with the seven nights on which Balram Halwai alias The White Tiger writes to the Chinese Premier (with the third night missing, and the fourth and sixth nights cleft into morning and night).

Balram Halwai a ‘thinking man of action and change’ begins his monologue by offering to help the visiting Chinese Prime Minister Mr. Wen Jiabao in his mission of deciphering the success of Indian entrepreneurs in Bangalore - the Mecca of information technology. Balram’s rise to become one of Bangalore’s most successful businessmen is the success-story of the century. He is the self-taught entrepreneur who declares himself to be the future. He believes that a rustic like him is far superior to educated morons in ties and suits who take orders all their lives. This diminutive car-driver, son of a rickshaw-puller, had begun his journey by murdering his employer and fleeing with seven lakh rupees.

Balram alias Munna then proceeds to narrate the story of his life. He hails from the poor village of Laxmangarh in Bihar and yearns to escape its darkness. One of his earliest memories is the cremation of his mother who had a miserable life. His father Vikram Halwai had, even in utter wretchedness, dared to dream of a dignified life. He never begged but fought his fate with rickshaw-pulling. His greatest dream was to educate his son:

> 'My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine - at least one - should live like a man.'(p. 30)

Balram, an intelligent student, is christened by the inspector of schools as 'a rare white tiger',

> "the creature that comes along only once in a generation." (p. 35)

But he is taken out of school and put to work in a tea-shop to repay debts incurred for his sisters' marriages. Trapped in the vicious cycle of exploitation, he swears that he would not stay a slave and would make his life beautiful. He soon learns the skill indispensable to success in new India – the ability to break the law, to do 'anything' to reach the top.

On the second night, Balram begins his letter by confessing once again that he has murdered his master. He fears that in retribution, his master's kin would have killed his entire family. Ironically, he becomes emotional recalling his handsome master Mr. Ashok and his beautiful wife Pinky madam. He is very particular about upholding their honour.

Balram then goes back to his life-story. After his father's death, young Balram works in tea-shops in his village Laxmangarh. He avoids becoming a 'crushed human spider' like other tea-shop boys, by eavesdropping on customers who dream of becoming 'car drivers' for rich men. After much begging and borrowing, he learns driving. Destiny lands him at the mansion of the landlord of Laxmangarh - Thakur Ramdev alias 'The Stork', in the nearby city of Dhanbad. Grovelling and flattering, he manages to become driver for the Stork's son, Mr. Ashok. Balram knows that masters 'own' servants and control them by terrorising their families but is glad to get what so many crave for - food, shelter and a uniform.

The Stork and his elder son Mukesh alias Mongoose represent a deeply casteist, communal feudal class. Ashok the American-educated younger son, who brings home an Indian-American wife, represents modern, liberal ideas. He fancies India but is shocked to see the way in which servants are treated. In stark contrast stands his brother the Mongoose who sucks servants' blood. Balram often gets excited listening to his masters talking about money. A man of ambition he is involved in a cut-throat competition with the other servants in the house. He wishes to do something better than pressing the smelly feet of his masters or pampering their dogs or gazing longingly at the foreign liquor they drink.

One day he gets to drive Mr. Ashok to his ancestral mansion in Laxmangarh. Being the driver of a rich man, he receives a hero's welcome in his native village. He is envied by all and a million dreams ride on his shoulders. Suffocated by the demands of his impoverished family, he

decides never to return to the wretched village. He is the 'rebellious devil' who hates the Creator for creating an unfair world and admires dark forces that always win.

On the fourth morning, Balram explains to the Chinese Premier the ugly reality of India's glorious democracy. Indian politicians claim that by virtue of 'democracy' India will defeat China - a Communist dictatorship. But Balram admires dictators like Fidel Castro who threw the rich out of Cuba to empower the poor. He feels that India should first have sewage pipes, drinking water and Olympic gold medals (like China), before boasting of democracy.

Balram then returns to his own story, to how elections are held and democracy is practised in his village of Laxmangarh. Fictitious voter's lists are made. Policemen and temple priests distribute free food and liquor cajoling villagers to allow others to cast their votes. The votes are sold by the landlords to the ruling politician -The Great Socialist, in return for important political offices. As usual, those who demand the right to cast their own votes are eliminated.

Working as a driver in Dhanbad, Balram realises that the same mockery of democracy continues in the cities. The Great Socialist allows Balram's masters to steal coal from government mines in return for generous donations towards election funds. Humiliated by the Great Socialist, the proud landlord and his sons decide to approach other politicians in Delhi for help in their illegal mining business. Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky shift to Delhi along with their Honda City car and their driver Balram. Balram is glad to escape from the darkness of Bihar and enter Delhi, the city of light.

On the fourth night that Balram writes to the Chinese premier, his narrative shifts to New Delhi, the capital of India and the new abode of his masters. Balram often loses his way in the crazy and chaotic metropolis. He notes the exorbitant lifestyle of the rich and the extreme pathos of the poor. He realizes that his corrupt masters are bribing their way into the echelons of power. One day he drives Mr. Ashok and his elder brother Mongoose to the heart of the Indian state - first the Congress party office and then Raisina Hills. He is awestruck as he sees places where the destinies of millions are decided. But the grand narrative of Indian democracy is soon reduced to a farce. As they pass a statue of Gandhi leading Indians from darkness to light, Mr. Ashok regrets having bribed a minister.

In Delhi, Balram is educated by fellow-drivers who wait endlessly for their masters outside bars and malls, on how to deal with miserly masters, rotten policemen, deadly mosquitoes, biting heat and cold, how to while

away time reading cheap magazines. Balram the contented loyalist learns of inhuman masters, servants who dream of strangulating their bosses, of call-centres where money is minted, the rotten business world and the thriving flesh trade. While his masters live in an ultra-modern skyscraper, he stays in the uninhabitable servant quarters, doing every odd task and bearing their insults. However, he is inspired by an episode at a mall where a man without shoes is denied entry. Balram and other drivers watch as the man shouts that he too is a human being. One of the drivers remarks that if all the poor were like that, they would rule India and the rich would be polishing their boots. Now Balram starts planning for a better life. He grooms himself trying to erase his hateful past. Though timid, he refuses to debase himself like other drivers and dreams big.

As relations worsen between Ashok and his wife Pinky who hates India, Balram suffers. One night, a drunk Pinky runs over a street-child and Balram is forced to plead guilty for the accident. He is terrified until he learns that his sacrifice would not be needed since no one had seen the accident. The hit-and-run case makes him realise that the kind Mr. Ashok too is like the rest of the master class and would not hesitate to kill him for his own interests.

Balram's letter on the fifth night takes up the story from where he had stopped on the fourth night. After learning of his wife's departure to America, Mr. Ashok almost throws Balram down from his thirteenth floor apartment for driving her to the airport. Balram pleads innocence and looks after his heartbroken master. After Ashok's cruel brother Mongoose arrives, Ashok begins to deride Balram. Hungry for dowry, Balram's relatives also start forcing him to get married. He begins to seriously think of escaping from his life of slavery.

On the sixth morning Balram writes of his own transformation. After Mr. Ashok’s marriage falls apart, Balram is shocked to see him mingle with call-girls and unscrupulous politicians. A dangerous change comes over him as he witnesses the debauchery of the rich. He grows wild and reckless. He meets a roadside bookseller who predicts that the unjust social order would soon be toppled by a revolution of the poor-

> 'Have you heard about the Naxals?....They've got guns...a whole army. They're getting stronger by the day....When the time is right, all of India will ...' (p.208)

Balram’s thoughts turn vengeful against the rich. He feels the city empathising with his rage -

> "*Speak to me of civil war*, I told Delhi. *I will*, she said....*Speak to me of blood on the streets*, I told Delhi. *I will*, she said. (p.221)

On the sixth night Balram tells the Chinese Premier how he had embraced a life of crime. He begins making money by cheating his master. He drinks expensive liquor, beds foreign whores and drives wherever he likes. Yet such petty acts cannot bring him the comforts or status of his master. The more he cheats his master, the more his greed and rage grows. Balram's big chance comes when Mr. Ashok collects loads of cash to bribe politicians. He is sorely tempted to murder Ashok, take the money and step into a great future. Though convinced that the poor have a claim to ill-begotten wealth, he fears the punishment that would befall his family. Ironically, a book of Urdu poetry helps this barely literate man to resolve his dilemma. He is inspired to be bold by these lines:

> "*You were looking for the key for years / But the door was always open!"* (p.253)

They lead him to victory in his war against the master class. As he puts it,

> "...the history of the world is the history of a ten-thousand-year war of brains between the rich and the poor...The poor win a few battles...but of course the rich have won the war for ten thousand years. ...one day, some wise men, out of compassion for the poor, left them signs and symbols in poems..." (p.254)

Balram's determination to kill his master is strengthened when he learns that he is planning to dismiss him. His accidental visit to a dirty slum reveals to him the horrible future he would have to face if he remains poor. Also, his family warns him that unless he marries the girl they have chosen for him and sends all his earnings to them, he would not be spared. Around the same time he hears of the bright prospects of Bangalore city. He desires to escape to Bangalore. After he visits the Delhi zoo, sees a rare white tiger languishing in a cage, identifies with it and faints, his mind is made up. He has already readied his murder weapon – a jagged, broken half of a whisky bottle. He writes a final letter to his granny telling her he can never spend his life like a caged White Tiger. On the D-day, Balram meditates and prays for courage. Then he takes his master Mr. Ashok on his rounds of gathering money from banks and ATMs. On a deserted road, he requests Ashok to get down and help him lift a tyre stuck in the mud. He hits Ashok's head with the jagged glass bottle and slits his throat. He then escapes with the cash and his little nephew Dharam to the railway station. He justifies the murder of Ashok on two grounds- first, if left

alive, he might hunt Balram down; second, he was taking 'advance revenge' for what his master's relatives would do to his family after the robbery was discovered. Also he is glad that his rich master had an easier death than his own poor consumptive father who died spewing blood and without any treatment. In his last letter on the seventh night, Balram muses delightfully over his great escape from Delhi. After killing his master, he cleverly dodges the law and lands in Bangalore. He lives in hotel rooms, carrying the red bag full of Mr. Ashok's seven lakh rupees. Again, the streets educate him. Hearing that outsourcing is the biggest business in Bangalore, he decides to get a foothold in this enterprise by running a taxi service for call centre employees. He bribes the police to get rid of rivals and his company- White Tiger Drivers steps into the vacuum. He soon becomes the owner of a huge firm with a fleet of SUVs and dozens of drivers. He assumes the new identity of 'Ashok Sharma, North Indian entrepreneur'. He masters the art of success in Bangalore - the future of India. The first step is to take the administration into confidence by greasing the palms of officials. As he says,

> "I wasn't alone....I had thousands on my side! You'll see my friends when you visit Bangalore - fat, paunchy men swinging their canes...harassing vendors and shaking them down for money. I'm talking of the police, of course." (p.299, 300)

The second is to forget ethics and adopt a practical approach. Things have come to such a pass in India - a nation plundered by foreigners and native rulers, with millions in a mad race to reach the top, that rule of law no longer applies. Balram is convinced that he is far better than the landlords of his village. The way he treats his drivers is very different from the way he was treated. He neither insults nor exploits them. He treats them as dignified employees, as per an honourable contract binding on both sides.

Balram tells the Chinese Premier that he is an enlightened slave who has attained freedom and success in twenty-first century India. He says,

> "...a few hundred thousand rupees of someone else's money, and a lot of hard work, can make magic happen in this country...I am worth fifteen times the sum I borrowed from Mr. Ashok. See for yourself at my website. See my motto: 'We Drive Technology Forward.' In *English*! See the photos of my fleet: twenty-six shining new Toyota Qualises...." (p. 301, 302)

Balram declares that he is his own master and has little sentiments. It is too dangerous for a White Tiger to keep friends. He prays for his family who would have been slaughtered or ostracised on account of his acts. His

nephew Dharam stays with him, feasting on his money and attending posh English schools. The day he questions Balram, he would be eliminated.

Balram roams the streets of Bangalore, to listen to the working classes. The politicians of the darkness have invaded the south. The masses talk of a revolution against the rich. Balram feels that this will never happen unless each poor man starts fighting for himself like Balram –

> "The book of your revolution sits in the pit of your belly, young Indian. Crap it out, and read. Instead of which, they are all sitting in front of colour TVs and watching cricket and shampoo advertisements." (p.304-305)

He wishes his employees would learn how to be successful from his lifestyle. He describes himself as one who has woken up while the others are still sleeping. He is conscious of every action and its repercussions. He claims to be one of the builders of the new India and asks,

> "Am I not part of all that is changing in this country? Haven't I succeeded in the struggle that every poor man here should be making....? True, there was the matter of murder...It has darkened my soul.....But isn't it likely that everyone who counts in this world, including our prime minister (including *you*, Mr Jiabao), has killed someone or the other on the way to the top?.." (p. 318)

He plans to enter the profitable real estate business and then the education sector where he plans to teach kids in English not about Gandhi but about real life –

> "A school full of White Tigers, unleashed on Bangalore! We'd have this city at our knees, I tell you. I could become the Boss of Bangalore." (p.319, 320)

Balram concludes by saying that he is proud to be a man of power. Though haunted by fear of punishment for his crime, he asserts:

> "...I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat. I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant." (p. 320-321)

Dissecting Modern India

Through the letters of the White Tiger, Aravind Adiga exposes the well-camouflaged reality of modern India. Balram tells the Chinese Premier,

> "...our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs." (p.4)

In a country which worships 36,000,004 gods but has atheist leaders who use religion as a means to power, duplicity is the mantra for success. Balram juxtaposes the two Indias –

> "..India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness." (p.14)

On one hand is 'India Rising' showcased at the international forums the Prime Minister pompously attends. The second picture is of the 'Real India' deliberately ignored:

> "Children - too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India." (p.20)

Another symbol of India's poverty is the class of 'rickshaw pullers' - human beasts of burden. Since they are not found in civilized nations, they are banned from posh parts of the capital Delhi to avoid embarrassment. In the same city stand symbols of luxury like the Maurya Sheraton Hotel.

Balram's village Laxmangarh in Gaya district of Bihar, near the river Ganga, exemplifies the paradoxical situation in India. While the coastal cities prosper, the Gangetic plains are mired in poverty. Tourists are told that Ganga grants salvation. To Balram, it is a deadly drain full of human waste and industrial effluents. Laxmangarh is the 'typical Indian village paradise' without running water, electricity or roads. Its paths are littered with sewage and its women starve to feed buffaloes which are the only source of income. Its four landlords own and extract rent on all the resources and molest the women, forcing most villagers to migrate to cities. The only thing that scares the landlords is the attacks by Naxalites - violent pro-poor revolutionaries. There is also the hypocritical politician greedy for power and money - the 'Great Socialist', who is held in great awe and declares that any village-boy can rise to become the Prime Minister of India. The village school with its crumbling walls and unpaid

alcoholic master is a satire on the government's education schemes. There are many bright children like Balram who cannot afford even this pathetic schooling and are forced into child labour. Naturally, India's parliamentary democracy is entrusted to illiterate masses. The way in which elections are conducted in the village and votes are forcibly sold to those with money and muscle-power exposes the reality behind India's famed electoral democracy.

Balram's descriptions of rural India highlight the lack of healthcare, illiteracy and unemployment. Laxmangarh has no hospital though foundation stones for three hospitals were laid by three politicians before three elections. The government hospital in the neighbourhood has no facilities. The post of Medical Superintendent is auctioned off. In return for bribes, the Superintendent makes false records and doctors get paid without ever visiting the hospital. Balram's consumptive father dies here, waiting for the doctor, spitting blood in the corridors. Illiteracy and unemployment plague the youth who while away time in empty dreams. Politicians profit by engineering class wars between Naxals and landlords, leading to untold misery for villagers.

Balram also speaks of the 'half-baked cities' full of 'half-baked men'. The glory of urbanization is lost in polluted, crowded and unplanned towns. Even as Balram's story shifts to the national capital Delhi, the novelist again focuses on economic divides. Delhi, a microcosm of India, is viewed very closely from the perspective of a rustic driver. Globalization and urbanization have arrived big time. But it is exclusive progress at the expense of many. The congested metropolis is filled with polluted black fog. Starving multitudes line the pavements. While the rich have electric heaters, the homeless perish in freezing cold. While Delhi marches to being like Dubai, the poor toiling on its huge projects remain underpaid and half-naked. Innocent servants are jailed for the crimes of their masters. While the rich can get away with any crime, the poor have no access to justice.

Another area of concern for the novelist is the actual practice of democracy at the grass-roots level. Foreign leaders visiting India, says the protagonist Balram, are told a lot about –

> "the splendour of democracy in India - the awe-inspiring spectacle of one billion people casting their votes to determine their own future..." (p.95)

In reality, as is seen in Balram's village of Laxmangarh, politicians and the wealthy rig elections. Balram's father who had seen twelve elections could never vote for himself. Balram mocks the powerless voters-

> "These are the three main diseases of this country...typhoid, cholera and election fever. The last one is the worst; it makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in....Like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh." (p.98)

Anybody who dares to question the gross malpractices is annihilated. As Balram sums up:

> "I am India's most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth." (p.102)

In towns and cities, the nexus between the rich and the politicians continues in a more covert manner. While the rich agree to fill their coffers, politicians allow them to siphon off public resources. Balram's masters are part of such a mining mafia in the coal rich town of Dhanbad. To top all this, the achievements of the popularly elected Chief Minister of Balram's home state of Bihar are listed as follows:

> "...a total of ninety-three criminal cases - for murder, rape, grand larceny, gun-smuggling, pimping, and many other such minor offences - are pending against the Great Socialist and his ministers....Not easy to get convictions when the judges are judging in the Darkness, yet....three of the ministers are currently in jail, but continue to be ministers. The Great Socialist himself is said to have embezzled one billion rupees ... and transferred that money into a bank account in a small, beautiful country in Europe full of white people and black money." (p.97, 98)

Balram's experiences in both rural and urban India lead him to conclude that there are only two castes in modern India - the rich and the poor. In free India, the traditional importance of caste has been increasingly replaced by that of class. As Balram puts it:

> "...this country, in its days of greatness... was like a zoo....Everyone in his place, everyone happy... on the fifteenth of August, 1947 ... the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart.... Those that were the most ferocious...had eaten everyone else up...That was all that counted now, the size of your belly...anyone with a belly could rise up....in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat - or get eaten up." (p.63, 64)

As the novel nears its climax, Aravind Adiga tries to decipher why India remains a poor nation and how a handful of rich men can enslave millions. His protagonist Balram has the answers. India's greatest

invention, says Balram, is the 'Rooster Coop'. Just as roosters are stuffed into cages and await slaughter, terrified by the blood and body parts of their brethren, the poor are enslaved for life by rich masters. Cart drivers faithfully deliver costly furniture, car drivers faithfully deliver bags containing millions and couriers faithfully deliver priceless diamonds. Nobody thinks of using the money to escape from their wretched existence. This is not because India is an honest nation but because no slave can ever escape the Coop. The reason is the Indian weakness for 'family'. If servants dream of rebellion, their families are wiped out. Also, the Coop is guarded from inside and servants are taught to stop each other from becoming innovators or entrepreneurs. That is why Indians whose minds are controlled do not need dictatorships or secret police as in Communist China.

As Balram inches closer to taking revenge upon the rich by murdering his master, the novel delves deeper into the explosive class-divide engulfing the nation. Balram notes that all the five star hotels and malls in Delhi prohibit entry to the have-nots. The political class backed by the elite simply crushes the poor. The national elections excite the poor but make no difference to their lives. The wealthy bribe the government to avoid paying taxes. The fact that a rotten party like the Great Socialist's party of the Darkness has won the elections testifies to the ethical blindness pervading the nation. However, the simmering rage of the poor has started to break out in the civil war unleashed by Maoists against the privileged and the political class, in several parts of India. There are millions who share Balram's longing for a bloody revolution to annihilate unscrupulous politicians and elites. It is against this backdrop that Balram murders his master Mr. Ashok and flees with his money to Bangalore.

The novel ends in the south Indian city of Bangalore where Balram Halwai makes his fortune. Bangalore- the global success-story of India's information technology industry, is comprehensively sketched in a single chapter. Balram speaks of the miracles of globalization, urbanization and ultra-modern technology. He also describes the overcrowding, pollution, slums and loss of morals. The administration is inefficient and corrupt. The ruling classes fool and subdue the naive masses. People slave night and day for foreign firms. Women are not safe. Each man lives just for himself. There is a ruthless competition to reach the top. Nevertheless, Balram admits that Bangalore also allows the precious freedom to be 'good'.

The novel also refers to post-colonial issues. The undesirability of colonialism and neo-colonialism is emphasized by unfavourably comparing a former colony like India with a Communist dictatorship like

China, which is ahead of India in several spheres, especially poverty-alleviation. Balram records his admiration for three nations that never allowed Europeans to rule over them - China, Afghanistan and Abyssinia. He predicts,

> "...the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse..." (p.5, 6)

Balram reiterates that India did not attain true freedom even in 1947 when the British left. The dependence of the Indian economy on the Western capitalist system is exemplified through Bangalore's outsourcing industry. As Balram sums up,

> "Everything in the city...came down to one thing. Outsourcing. Which meant doing things in India for Americans over the phone. Everything flowed from it - real estate, wealth, power, sex.....men and women in Bangalore live like the animals in the forest do. Sleep in the day and work all night.....because their masters are on the other side of the world, in America." (p.298)

Relentless Orwellian Satire

The White Tiger is Aravind Adiga's Orwellian satire on twenty-first century India. It uses epistolary and flashback techniques to tell the story of its protagonist Balram Halwai who is a murderer. Interestingly, the narrative is built around the poster put out by the police to nab Balram. The entire novel is in the form of Balram's brilliantly witty letter to the Chinese premier, an attractive peg for Adiga's personal views on modern India. The minimalism, humour and directness of the style complement the caustic sarcasm and scathing irony. The author systematically builds up the climax, delineating the events that lead the loyal servant to butcher his master. The suspense never slackens.

Aravind Adiga mounts a relentless direct attack on contemporary Indian society and polity, on the greedy ruling class and elites. He says what most Indians feel but do not dare to say. He describes both villages and metropolises with the keen observation and deep empathy of an insider. The entire novel revolves around metaphors of darkness and light. Balram refers to his native village as the Darkness and to the great cities as the Light. He believes that he has made it out of the darkness, but his idea of light is based on materialism, not spirituality. He debates whether a poor man should aspire only to a life of ideals, and whether an ethical approach can really help him attain the desirable things of life today.

Adiga is concerned about the new rules of success which demand absence of ethical considerations.

The narrative is marked by deep empathy for the poor. For instance, Balram who had to leave school on account of his poverty says,

> '....no boy remembers his schooling like one who was taken out of school...'(p.10)

There is also the touching scene where Balram mops up his dying father's blood. He is a cold-blooded murderer but is quickly moved by the sight of rickshaw-pullers, street-children or even prostitutes whom he sees as caged animals. Adiga depicts the psyche of the downtrodden through little details. He light-heartedly explores the world of drivers, their relationships with their employers and cars, the agony of those who are conditioned to be slaves. The servant who knows all the secrets of his master and has been driven mad by humiliation is unfathomably dangerous. The pain of poverty is conveyed through such lines –

> "A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank....The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen." (p.26, 27)

Dr. Tapati Talukdar observes that despite occasional hyperboles, Adiga's depiction of poverty in modern India is "too convincing to be dismissed as an exaggerated account." She draws attention to the poverty-stricken village of Laxmangarh, the emaciated physique of Balram's rickshaw-puller father and his death due to T.B., the funeral of Balram's mother, the atrocities inflicted by the master-class and so on (Talukdar 118-126).

The novel gains universality by drawing on existential irony and human nature. Adiga offers a masterly analysis of the master-servant relationship. Master and servant are attached to each other, yet separated by an unbridgeable divide. In the master's condescension and the servant's hidden ambition, both glossed over by the veneer of courtesy and loyalty, there is a constant struggle for power. Their reversing positions keep the world moving. Adiga also captures the corrupting influence of modern life. Bored with their respective lives, the rich and the poor envy each other. Adiga creates rollicking humour by viewing the half-glamorous, half-absurd lives of the rich through the eyes of village bumpkins like Balram. Yet, the pathetic aspirations of the have-nots and the sorrows of the haves are not missed. There is a hint of poetry in Balram's moral dilemmas and his silent communion with the city of Delhi. He suffers the guilt of killing his master. Like Lady Macbeth he declares that all the skin

-whitening creams sold in the markets of India would not clean his hands. As Pankaj Mishra concludes, “With remorselessly and delightfully mordant wit, *The White Tiger* anatomises the fantastic cravings of the rich; it evokes, too, with startling accuracy and tenderness, the no less desperate struggles of the deprived” (qtd. in Adiga, *The White Tiger* blurb).

Critical Review

The White Tiger offers a realistic analysis of factors shaping the destinies of the individual and of the nation at large today. Its theme is the contemporary class-divide. Aravind Adiga pits the India of poverty against the India of wealth. His protagonist Balram rages against the inequality and injustice in a democratic welfare state. He finds satisfaction in exposing before a foreign leader, the hidden ugliness of a nation, where millions starve, illiteracy is rampant and where clean drinking water, electricity and roads still remain dreams for many, while a select few monopolise public resources and hypocritical politicians grab power by violent means. In an interview in June 2009, Aravind Adiga explains, "I always had an idea for two related books on either side of the great divide in modern Indian history, which was 1991 when India opened up its socialist economy to the world. That created what's called "The New India", the India of rapid economic growth and great disparities of wealth, which is the India of *The White Tiger*. .... It just seemed that the most interesting story ... was the story of the people who were invisible in Indian cinema and literature today, which is the servants and the poor who still make up the bulk of our country, even after all these years of economic growth" (qtd.in Srivastava 88). Adiga says he has written of the India which he lives in, where commoners still have to struggle for basic necessities - “Balram Halwai is a composite of various men I've met when travelling through India. I spend a lot of time loitering about train stations, or bus stands, or servants' quarters and slums, and I listen and talk to the people around me. There is a kind of continuous murmur and growl beneath middle-class life in India, and this noise never gets recorded, Balram is what you'd hear if one day the drain and faucets in your house start talking" (qtd. in Singh 90).

Aravind Adiga's detailed analysis of everyday life, especially in the backward region of Bihar, leads him to conclude that there are only two castes in India - rich and poor, and only one destiny - might is right. He dissects several lacunae in rural and urban lives. If lack of basic amenities, neglect of healthcare and education, and massive unemployment plagues villages, overcrowding, poor infrastructure, pollution and crime plagues

cities. Even as the haves march towards greater progress and comforts, the have-nots sink deeper into the abyss. One cannot succeed without compromising on morals. As Navneet Kumar opines, "The novel stands out for its uncompromising portrait of a country on a relentless march to its material development" (Kumar 223).

Along with the wealthy, the plutocratic Indian polity is also a target of Adiga's stinging criticism. He cleverly uses the elections in Laxmangarh to shatter the grand narrative of Indian democracy. He reiterates that elections in India are marked by rigging and bartering of votes, unholy deals between elites and politicians, and bribing or coercion of voters. Only those with lots of money and muscle-power can contest or win elections. And once politicians gain power, all promises made to the electorate are forgotten. There is rampant criminalisation of politics. Despite being indicted in criminal cases, ministers continue in office, exploiting the tardiness and corruption in the criminal justice system. As Sujatha S. observes, "*The White Tiger*...a political novel...churns out a comprehensive picture of the rich and the poor equally affected by the political system of a country that is going global" (Sujatha S. 70) .

Aravind Adiga's earnest portrayal of life in the Indian capital Delhi, of its extremes of wealth and poverty, of its wealthy who control the government machinery, of its slums, pavement-dwellers and wretched construction labourers, mirrors the bitter truth that development in India still remains elitist and not mass-based. As writer-activist Arundhati Roy puts it, "It's as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded onto two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and a tiny little one) that have set off in resolutely opposite directions. The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness and disappears" (Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 188-89).

Aravind Adiga tries to unravel the reasons underlying the continuing economic inequalities in India. His image of the Great Indian Rooster Coop that keeps the masses in eternal mental servitude to a handful of rich men, innovatively reveals the reality of modern India. Adiga also attempts to see what the future holds for a nation where plutocracy dominates democracy and where the patience of commoners is continually tested by unscrupulous politicians. He finds clues in the reports of anti-state civil war by Maoist rebels fighting for the rights of the poor and tribals. He predicts a bitter class-war, a bloody revolution by the have-nots to topple the haves. Adiga's apprehensions are endorsed by the numerous conflicts in India today between corporate giants and peasants or tribals who oppose the usurpation of their lands and resources. The murder of the wealthy

businessman Mr. Ashok by his driver Balram is set in this volatile atmosphere. Balram has no personal hatred towards Ashok. His act is symbolic. He murders not a man, but a 'class' of the soulless rich on behalf of his own class – the poor who have been fatalistic for too long. His habit of thinking, his boldness and his empathy for the underdog make him unique. Ironically, liberation can come to him only after he has blinded his conscience. The symbolism is deep:

> "The Stork's son opened his eyes - just as I pierced his neck - and his lifeblood spurted into my eyes. I was blind. I was a free man." (p. 286)

Rules of life and success have changed in the twenty-first century India.

The novel concludes in Bangalore city - symbol of the great Indian dream. Vinay Rai in his book *Think India* describes Electronics City, Bangalore (the address of the White Tiger) as "the two-square-mile area that catapulted....the whole country onto the world scene, forever altering India's reputation and earning potential - and blowing up a whirlwind of economic, geopolitical, and social change that is still reshaping the country..." It is the "dynamic epicentre of twenty-first century India", the heart of the hi-tech Information Technology revolution that brought unimaginable global recognition and prosperity. "The innovations flying off Bangalore opened up myriad new enterprises and spinoffs - from customer-service call centres to outsourced legal and medical work" (Rai 18-23). No doubt, India has progressed due to her hard-working masses and sterling entrepreneurs. *The Economist* reports, "The Indian tiger is on the prowl... After peevish years cast as China's underperforming neighbours, the huntress is now in hot pursuit....India should soon... become the third biggest economy, behind only America and China" (Rai 44).

However, Adiga is concerned about the masses untouched by modernisation, by the loss of humaneness among the privileged and by the lack of ethics in public and private lives. As historian Ramachandra Guha rightly opines, the reputed software industry is commonly acknowledged as the 'poster boy' of the reforms. Software enterprises are clustered round a few major cities: Delhi, Madras, Hyderabad and Bangalore - "India's Silicon Valley". Economic growth has led to massive increase in the middle class, unbridled urbanization and consumerism. However, if some metropolises represent the benign face of liberalization, most of the country especially large backward areas beset with starvation deaths and farmer suicides have seen only the brutal face of liberalization (Guha 692-719). Veteran economist Bimal Jalan also cautions that though the corporate sector looks robust, in the absence of effective governance and

responsible politics, the growth rate would soon tumble. India has the largest number of poor in the world, one of the lowest ranks in global human development index, an unsatisfactory growth of agriculture, high levels of pollution, abysmal rural infrastructure and stagnant employment levels. It is the interplay of politics, economics and governance that will determine the future of India (Jalan xi - xv).

Nevertheless, despite the cynicism and disillusionment, *The White Tiger* is a subversive novel urging the have-nots to fight for a better future. As Balram Halwai remarks,

> "...in any city or town...you will hear stirrings, rumours, threats of insurrection.... An Indian revolution? No, sir. It won't happen. People in this country are still waiting for the war of their freedom to come from somewhere else...That will never happen. Every man must make his own Benares." (p.303, 304)

Perhaps, the very purpose of addressing the novel to the Chinese premier is to urge Indians to introspect upon their shortcomings and learn a lesson from the Chinese with regard to combating underdevelopment. The new millennium has seen the rise of China as an economic superpower. In 2005, the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao came to India. Remarkably he chose to visit Bangalore ahead of the capital Delhi. His delegation comprised mostly businessman and their meetings were mostly with Indian chambers of commerce. In a speech in Bangalore, Wen Jiabao called for an alliance between Indian software and Chinese hardware in order to ensure that the twenty-first century would be an 'Asian century' (Guha 715-716). Management guru Gurcharan Das says, "What can China teach us? The first lesson is to have clear national objectives. For twenty years China has had only one objective - to become an economic superpower and lift its people out of poverty - and it is pursuing it single-mindedly" (Das 269).

Challenging a Nation to Face Itself

To sum up, the unpalatable realities and rotten core of twenty-first century India are described graphically by Aravind Adiga. The White Tiger's transformation reflects the changing value systems of the nation. Adiga explores the quietly simmering outrage of the oppressed. The novel is an open letter to the deadened conscience of the nation. It is a salvo on behalf of the subaltern. It is a powerful warning that crime and terror will only escalate until social inequalities are removed. It is an urgent plea to the haves to bridge the dangerous class-divide before it is too late.

Speaking to *The Guardian* in October 2008, Adiga denied that he was attacking the growth story of India in *The White Tiger* - "Well, this is the reality for a lot of Indian people and it's important that it gets written about, rather than just hearing about the five per cent of Indians who are doing well....At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the West, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society... criticism by writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens in the nineteenth century helped England and France to become better societies. That's what I am trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination" (Singh 150). Elsewhere, Adiga says, "The most patriotic thing a creative artist can do is challenge people to see their country as it is" (qtd. in Greenberg www.highbeam.com/publications/newsweek). The words of Susan H. Greenberg neatly sum up the situation: "Indians may not always like what Adiga has to say, but their future depends on his freedom to keep saying it" (Greenberg www.highbeam.com/publications/newsweek).

5.3. Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* (2005)

Vikas Swarup was born in 1963 in Allahabad and joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1986. Having served as top diplomat in several countries, he was the Consul-general of India in Osaka-Kobe, Japan, before taking over his current assignment as spokesperson of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. He has written for prestigious national and international magazines. *Q&A* (2005) is his first novel. It has sold translation rights in forty-two languages. It won South Africa's Books Boeke Prize 2006 and the Paris Book Fair's Reader's Prize- the Prix Grand Public 2007. The film version of *Q&A* - *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), won more than seventy awards including eight Oscars. Swarup has also written two other novels - *Six Suspects* (2008) and *The Accidental Apprentice* (2013), and a short story *A Great Event* for the anthology *Children's Hours: Stories of Childhood*. Swarup's novels have been praised for their intelligence and readability.

Q&A is a kaleidoscope of colossal, vibrant, chaotic and enchanting India. It delineates the destiny of underprivileged youngsters vis-a-vis the destiny of India today. *The Independent* calls it "A beginner's guide to the quintessential India" (qtd. in Swarup, *Six Suspects* blurb). *India Today* describes it as "An extraordinary narrative...through the underbelly of urban India....the tale of the new millennium's just-turned adults...." (qtd. in Swarup, *Q&A* blurb). To quote *The Sunday Telegraph*, "...Swarup is

able to give us snapshots of Indian society...at its most lurid and extreme. If the prose style suggests social realism, the spirit of the novel is cinematic, even cartoon-like...A broad and sympathetic humanity underpins the whole book" (qtd. in Swarup, *Q&A* blurb).

Saga of a Slumdog Millionaire

Vikas Swarup's *Q&A*, set chiefly in contemporary Mumbai, is the life-story of eighteen year old Ram Mohammad Thomas, a waiter from the slums of Dharavi, Mumbai. An orphan, he grows up on the streets, fighting for survival. His amazing journey culminates in his participation in a quiz show-'Who Will Win A Billion?' By a strange quirk of fate, Ram, who has no formal education, answers all the twelve questions and wins a billion rupees. Soon after, he is arrested on charges of cheating. A young lawyer Smita Shah comes to his rescue. Ram tells her how the experiences of his life gave him the answers to each question. The picaresque plot is built around the sequence of questions asked in the quiz. Each question and answer delves into a specific episode in the protagonist's life.

Abandoned at birth, Ram is brought up by Father Timothy a Catholic priest in Delhi. The priest names him Ram Mohammad Thomas to appease local religious leaders. After he dies, eight year old Ram is sent to a Juvenile Home where he meets his best friend Salim Ilyasi, an eight year old from Bihar, orphaned by communal riots. Sold to a gang of beggar-masters, Ram and Salim reach Mumbai. After escaping from the gang, Ram works for former Bollywood actress Neelima Kumari while Salim works as a tiffin boy. Ram's thirst for knowledge and compassion is evident even in the hard life of the chawls. One day, he hurts a drunken neighbour who tries to molest his own daughter. Fearing arrest, he flees to Delhi. Here, thirteen year old Ram works for an Australian diplomat, who is later caught for espionage, thanks to Ram's spying. On the way back to Mumbai, a train dacoity takes away Ram's hard-earned salary. He shoots one of the dacoits and escapes to Agra, where he works as a tourist guide at the Taj Mahal, meeting several fascinating characters. He falls in love with Nita, a girl forced into prostitution. However, he fails to make enough money to free her and returns to Mumbai where he is reunited with Salim who is training to be an actor. Working as a bartender in a cheap hotel, he sees the ad for the quiz show 'Who Will Win A Billion?' He participates not for money but to kill the host Prem Kumar, who had tortured two women dear to him- his late employer Neelima Kumari and his beloved Nita. Prem Kumar mocks and threatens him. Ram refuses to be cowed

down by the rich and mighty. With his intelligence, phenomenal memory and incredible luck, Ram overturns the script and wins the jackpot. Giving up his plans of murder and revenge, he uses his prize money to help those in need. His real victory lies in his disarming faith, compassion and courage.

Personal Adventures, National Concerns

Each incident in the life of the protagonist Ram deals with varied facets of contemporary national life - social, political and economic.

The workings of the law are revealed at the very beginning when Ram is arrested after he wins the quiz. The producers of the show, who do not wish to part with the prize money of one billion, influence the Home Minister and bribe the Police Commissioner in order to make Ram confess that he has won by cheating. The rich can buy the agents of the law in order to crush the poor. The police brag of how they can extract the needed confessions through third-degree torture without leaving a single mark on the body. Subjected to inhuman torture, Ram finally agrees to sign a statement that he has cheated and thus forfeits the prize money. The law and order system lies exposed when Ram says,

> "Street boys like me come at the bottom of the food chain. Above us are the petty criminals, like pick-pockets. Above them come the extortionists and loan sharks. Above them come the dons. Above them come the big business houses. But above all of them are the police. They have the instruments of naked power. Who can police the police?" (p.25)

Through the picture of Mumbai's Dharavi slums where Ram lives, the underbelly of 'India Shining' is exposed. The poor are always on the wrong side of the law and only wait to be arrested. The destiny of the apathetic slum-dwellers is too obvious:

> "When your whole existence is 'illegal', when you live on the brink of penury in an urban wasteland, where you jostle for every inch of space and have to queue even for a shit, arrest has a certain inevitability about it....one day there will be a warrant with your name on it....." (p.12)

Generations are taught never to cross the lines separating rich and poor. Even Ram's participation in a quiz is anathema –

> "The brain is not an organ we are authorized to use. We are supposed to use only our hands and legs." (p.12)

On the other hand, Ram's victory in the quiz is much admired. Ram the conscious underdog values education. He prefers death rather than forfeit the billion he has won. The idea of confronting the scheming powerful excites him. His charismatic lawyer Smita represents the empowered young woman rising from the bottom of the heap.

The first question that Ram is asked in the quiz is to name the blockbuster movie in which actors Armaan Ali and Priya Kapoor first starred together. He chooses the correct option 'Betrayal' to win a thousand rupees. The story behind this answer traces the adulation of street-kids like Ram and Salim for Bollywood star Armaan Ali. The movie-theatre is succour for the poor who flee from reality to soothing fantasies. Child labourers with no future lose themselves in the world of cinema. Their sole ambition is to meet a movie-star who 'kills bad guys on behalf of the poor'. The ugliness of the glamour-world is exposed when Armaan Ali tries to molest little Salim- a die-hard fan of his.

The second question for rupees two thousand is about the inscription on the Cross. Ram answers correctly - 'INRI'. Behind this answer lies the sad story of a boy abandoned at birth. Father Timothy who brings him up names him Ram Mohammad Thomas, at the behest of the All-Faith Committee to prevent a communal riot. In a country haunted by communalism, the anti-conversion debate is on a high and irate mobs ransack and burn churches. Ram is brought up in a secular atmosphere, but his idyllic childhood is shattered with Father Timothy's murder. He advocates religious harmony on the quiz show:

> "Look within your heart, and there you will find both Ram and Karim." (p.67)

The third question for five thousand rupees is about the smallest planet in the solar system. Ram knows the answer - 'Pluto'. It is the result of living in a chawl in Mumbai, next door to an astronomer named Mr. Shantaram, expelled from the Aryabhatta Space Research Institute after taking to alcoholism following the crediting of his discovery to another scientist. He tortures his wife and even tries to molest his daughter Gudiya who is like a sister to Ram. One day, Ram pushes the drunken Shantaram from a staircase and fearing he is dead, runs away to Delhi. Shantaram learns a lesson. Gudiya grows up to become the lawyer Smita Shah.

Here, the novel presents real slices of life from the chawls, the one-room tenements of the lower middle classes, with common walls and lavatories – 'the smelly armpit of Mumbai'. As Ram observes,

> "Those who live here are only marginally better off than those...in slums... The rich people....in their marble and granite four bedroom flats, they enjoy. The slum people...in squalid, tattered huts, they suffer. And we...in the over-crowded chawls, we simply live." (p.70)

Ram works in a metal foundry amid excessive heat. His friend Salim is one of Mumbai's five thousand tiffin-delivery boys who work from dawn to dusk. The plight of women is evident in the fate of Mrs. Shantaram and Gudiya who suffer domestic violence. When Ram complains to the administrator of the chawls, he replies,

> "...I know the daily stories of wife-beating and abuse and incest and rape, which take place in chawls all over Mumbai. Yet no one does anything. We Indians have this sublime ability to see the pain and misery around us, and yet remain unaffected by it...." (p. 83, 84)

The fourth question in the quiz takes the reader to a government juvenile home in Delhi. After the murder of his guardian Father Timothy, little Ram had been shifted to this orphanage-cum-prison where children are stuffed into crowded dormitories. The officials pocket government funds, leaving them to languish without proper food, clothes, sanitation, medicines, academics or sports. The wardens torture them. Each boy has a tragic tale to narrate reflecting the cruel fate of a nation's promising future - horrible poverty, families burnt alive in communal riots, addicted fathers, prostitute mothers, familial abuse, bonded labour and an insensitive police machinery that adds to their misery. As Ram puts it:

> "....Whatever you do, wherever you go, never go to the police. Ever." (p.118)

Beggar-masters buy children from these orphanages, paying hefty sums to government officials. The orphans, lured with the promise of a happy life in big cities, are maimed and forced to beg. Ram and Salim are bought by one such beggar-master from Bombay - Mamman Pillai. When they reach Bombay, Salim with his Bollywood dreams goes into raptures. But Ram notes that Bombay houses both the sparkling residences of film stars and dirty slum colonies with pot-bellied half-naked children. Ram and Salim are housed amid maimed boys and taught the devotional songs of Surdas in honour of Lord Krishna. Ram discovers the reality of the place and just before being blinded and made to sing and beg on the streets, they flee. When Ram is asked on the show to name the god whose devotee Surdas was, he knows the answer well. Thus the novel delineates the sad fate of the child citizen.

The difficult fifth question makes Ram recall his escapades in Delhi. Since he can speak English, he becomes a servant for an Australian diplomat Colonel Taylor. Ram's experiences here expose the profligate life of the neo-colonial ruling elite and the murky dealings infesting the government machinery. Racism and mental slavery to the whites still exists. The Taylors declare that an Indian can do anything for a bribe. To prove them right, the postman, the electrician, the telephone repair man, and even the census man (who leaves out the servants) display a weakness for bribes. Ram's blood boils when the Taylors refer to 'bloody Indians' frequently. Yet, for food and shelter, Ram learns to swallow his pride and smile whenever his masters smile. The class divide is obvious when he observes,

> "Granted we servants are invisible people...but to be left out even from our country's head count is a bit too galling." (p.125)

Ram busts Colonel Taylor's plans to ferret Indian defence secrets. His anonymous call leads to Taylor's arrest, his being declared 'persona non grata' and immediate deportation. When Ram is asked the meaning of the term 'persona non grata' during the quiz, he remembers the incident relating to Taylor and answers - 'that the diplomat is not acceptable'.

The sixth question re-caps Ram's life in Dharavi. The sub-human conditions of the slum highlight the class divide in Mumbai and in India. Dharavi is described thus:

> "... a two-hundred-hectare triangle of swampy urban wasteland...Destitute migrants from all over the country jostle for their own handful of sky in Asia's biggest slum.....They came to Mumbai, the city of gold, with dreams in their hearts of striking it rich....But that gold turned to lead a long time ago....Its open drains teem with mosquitoes. Its stinking, excrement-lined communal latrines are full of rats...Mounds of filthy garbage lie on every corner...you have to suck in your breath to squeeze through its narrow, claustrophobic alleys..... Amidst the modern skyscrapers and neon-lit shopping complexes of Mumbai, Dharavi sits like a cancerous lump...And the city refuses to recognize it. ... the residents...struggling simply to survive...don't care. So they live in illegal houses and use illegal electricity, drink illegal water and watch illegal cable TV. They work in...illegal factories and illegal shops, and even travel illegally... but a cancer cannot be stopped simply by being declared illegal. It still kills with its slow poison." (p.156-157)

While living in this slum, Ram works as a bartender at Colaba, where a drunken industrialist speaks of his wife from Port-au-Prince, the capital of

Haiti. When Ram is asked to identify the capital of Papua New Guinea for one lakh rupees, he can easily eliminate the wrong options, thanks to his conversation with the industrialist about international destinations.

The seventh question has its answer hidden in Ram's journey from Delhi to Bombay on the Western Express. In a dacoity on the train, Ram loses his hard-earned wages. One of the dacoits attempts to molest a young girl. Incensed, Ram grabs the dacoit's gun and shoots him dead. He can clearly read the words 'Colt' inscribed on the gun. Stunned by his own actions and fearing arrest, he escapes to Agra. On the show, when Ram is asked to name the inventor of the revolver, he remembers the dacoit's gun, and guesses the option ‘Samuel Colt’ to win two lakh rupees. Thus, the novel uses this episode to hint at the common man's fear of both police and criminals, at the sorry state of civilian security in contemporary India.

Question number eight relates to the Indian armed forces and the tragedy of war. Ram remembers the outbreak of a war between India and Pakistan when he was living in a Mumbai chawl. Air raid sirens force citizens into underground bunkers. There is a surge of patriotism as people watch live television reportage. However, one of the residents of the chawl, Lance Naik Balwant Singh, a veteran of the 1971 Bangladesh war, exposes the ugliness of brutal warfare. Having lost a leg in battle, he recounts the horrors he has seen firsthand. He asserts that real war is a serious and fatal business, quite different from the sensational soap-operas of reporters. There is also a satire on war in the capitalist era:

> "First there are the advertisements. This war is sponsored by Mother India Toothpaste and Jolly Tea. Then we have a broadcast by the Prime Minister. Indian forces are winning the war, he tells us earnestly...There will be an end to terrorism. And hunger. And poverty. Contribute generously to the Soldiers' Benefit Fund, he urges us...a young actress comes on TV and says the same things, but in filmi style." (p. 195)

Nuclear weapons have changed the entire equation of war on the subcontinent:

> "...there is no real protection against the atom bomb....the water will become air. The air will become fire. The sun will disappear. A huge mushroom cloud will rise in the sky. And we will all die..." (p.196)

The people of the chawl are so impressed to hear the exploits of soldier Balwant Singh in the 1971 Bangladesh war that they demand a gallantry medal for him. However, army officers reveal that he is a deserter who had fled the battlefield to meet his wife and newborn son who also died in the war. Unable to bear the humiliation, Singh hangs himself. When Ram is

asked to identify the highest gallantry award given to the Indian armed forces, he remembers Balwant Singh and answers - '*Param Vir Chakra'*, thus winning rupees five lakhs.

The next question relates to the world of cricket, leading Ram to recall his reunion with Salim. Salim's journey to stardom reads like a fairy-tale. He begins by preparing his portfolio while still a tiffin-boy. His faith and perseverance symbolizes the struggle and triumph of Mumbai's subaltern. Hounded by a tragic past, he has to hide from Mamman, the beggar-master. Just as Salim is about to be set ablaze by a Hindu mob during communal riots, he is rescued by Ahmed Khan - a powerful bookie and contract killer. Thus begins his brush with Mumbai's notorious underworld. Salim's presence of mind foils Ahmed Khan's plans to eliminate film producer Abbas Rizvi and he ends up killing Mamman. In gratitude, Rizvi initiates Salim into Bollywood. The story of Salim's stay with a bookie informs Ram about the cricketing world. Therefore, when he is asked about the number of centuries that star batsman Sachin Mavlankar (a pseudonym for Sachin Tendulkar) has scored, he answers - thirty-six - winning ten lakh rupees. The novel thus unravels the workings of India's powerful underworld and its intricate ties with the world of glamour, sports, business and politics.

The tenth question relates to the world of glitz and to the empowered Indian woman. Ram works for three years as servant to a former actress Neelima Kumari (who is closely modelled on yesteryears Bollywood diva Meena Kumari). She fondly recalls her lost glory as a tragic actor. A spinster, she yearns for affection and falls for a young man who tortures her. Finally she kills herself - decked up and holding her National Award. Ram flees and her corpse is found six months later. Tragically, pictures of her decomposed body are published by the insensitive media. When Ram is asked about the year in which Neelima Kumari won the National Award, he answers correctly-'1985', to win ten million rupees. Thus, Swarup echoes the fate of the modern Indian woman who is a Tragedy Queen. As Neelima Kumari puts it:

> "It is the destiny of a woman to suffer in silence." (p. 265)

Also, the sad reality of the world of showbiz is revealed by Ram when he says,

> "...life with a movie star is not as glamorous...they are exactly like you and me with the same anxieties and insecurities...They live in a fish bowl. First, they hate it, then, as adulation grows, they start loving it. And when people no longer shower attention on them, they just shrivel up and die." (p. 245, 246)

The eleventh question unravels Ram's life as a tourist guide at the Taj Mahal in Agra. He stays in the outhouse of a palace owned by Queen Swapna Devi, a popular philanthropist. Ram's friends - the endearing autistic boy Shankar and the Queen's maid Lajwanti, expose the hypocrisy of the elite. Swapna Devi had cast out her own son Shankar to conceal her illicit love affair. She refuses him medical aid even when he is dying of rabies. In a cinematic climax, Ram carries his corpse to her palace and exposes the truth in a glittering party. Lajwanti is a village girl struggling for her family. When she is cruelly refused any help for her sister's wedding, she steals the royal jewels and is jailed. As Swapna Devi puts it:

> "...You people who are poor should never try to overreach yourselves. Stay within your limits and you will not get into trouble." (p. 318)

The outhouse of the palace represents Agra's underbelly with its small joys and great sorrows. It echoes the callousness of the rich and the solidarity of the poor. The poor like Ram, Shankar and Lajwanti are compassionate and generous. But Swapna Devi is ruthless to her poor tenants whose children die for want of medicines. Also, Ram encounters in Agra, Nita - the love of his life. She symbolizes the exploitation of rural women. She is a beautiful girl of the Bedia tribe that sells its daughters to escape starvation. Ram robs the four lakh rupees needed to free Nita from the brothel, but in vain. He gives the cash to an English teacher who desperately needs it to buy anti-rabies vaccines for his son. The grateful teacher promises to help him. The eleventh question Ram is asked is –

> "In which play by Shakespeare do we find the character Costard ?" (p. 337)

Ram who has never heard of Shakespeare takes the English teacher's help to get the right answer - 'Love's Labour's Lost' and win ten crore rupees.

The last and twelfth question becomes a battle of the haves and have-nots. Prem Kumar, the host of the quiz show, tries to demoralise Ram. The last question is difficult – 'Name the father of Mughal empress Mumtaz Mahal'. But Ram answers this easily since he has worked as guide at the Taj Mahal. Immediately, the producers pretend that it is a fake question. Another question is to be put to stump Ram. During the interval, Ram confronts Prem Kumar about his torture of Neelima Kumari and Nita. He plans to shoot Kumar. However, Ram realises that money can redeem many lives. He offers to spare Kumar if he helps him with the last question. Using his hints, Ram answers that Beethoven's Piano Sonata Number 29 is in the key ' B flat major', to win a hundred crore. The events

after Ram's victory and subsequent arrest read like poetic justice. The lawyer Smita who comes to Ram's rescue is Gudiya whom he had once saved. She wins the case and the company pays Ram the prize money. The company goes bankrupt. The game-show host is killed by the producers of the show. Using his prize money, Ram frees thirty-five children after busting beggarmaster Mamman's gang and puts them with a child welfare agency. He frees maid Lajwanti from jail and arranges her sister's wedding. He secretly finances his friend Salim's role in a film. He rescues and marries Nita. In the last scene Smita and Ram discuss Ram's lucky coin which has 'heads' on both sides. He throws the coin into the sea saying that real luck comes from within.

Finally, the novel also incorporates post-colonial aspects. It punctures colonial knowledge systems by upholding the triumph of the marginalized Ram who relies on the practical knowledge of the streets. The racism of the American producer of the quiz-show is obvious. The ruthless neo-colonial enterprise stands out in the elaborate links between Western and Indian capitalists who market the quiz-show. The penniless brown waiter from India wrecks their pre-planned script by winning the largest jackpot in history. The colonial centre assumes that a man from the margins can never be successful unless he cheats. Ram cannot be let off lightly for he has sinned gravely by challenging the established order. Ironically, Ram is brought up by an English priest, who teaches him English, giving him an edge in life. Ram’s stay with Colonel Taylor the Australian diplomat shows the lavish, degenerate lifestyle and racism of the neo-colonial elite. Also, India is dotted with Western Mc Donald's and Pizza Hut outlets open only to the well-dressed. Outside their doors, street-kids fight over leftovers.

Bollywood Suspense Thriller

As far as the stylistic aspects are concerned, *Q&A* is a suspense thriller written in a delightfully simple style. The protagonist takes the reader into confidence with his tongue-in-cheek humour and wit. Humour and pathos are rolled into a heady mix, without any melodrama. From beggars to criminals, middle class to film stars, local trains, slums and chawls to palatial mansions and towering skyscrapers, Vikas Swarup goes over Mumbai with a fine-toothed comb. Swarup offers a three-dimensional image of Delhi - whether it is the Paharganj railway station or Connaught Place, slums or posh areas, monuments or landmarks. He brings alive Agra, the city of the Taj Mahal, juxtaposing antique Mughal art with modern malls, the profligacy of the rich with the wretchedness of the poor.

He effortlessly takes whirlwind tours through the worlds of cricket, films or mafia dons. He expertly captures the common man - driver or bartender, waiter or maid. Diverse experiences add to the thrill - an Indo-Pak war, stories of voodoo, or even a train dacoity. In the words of Suresh Kohli, "*Q&A* is an unconventional novel..... it does not resort to a standard storytelling style....with a beginning, a middle and an end... Instead it has twelve gripping stories...of varied lengths. And they tell in racy, lyrical manner the tragic-comic experiences of a have-not who goes on to become a billionaire by sheer grit and determination even before he is out of his teens. (This) lyrical book breaks new ground in storytelling" (Kohli vikasswarup.net).

The characters are remarkably true to life. Vikas Swarup displays admirable psychological insight into diverse characters. He translates precisely the thought-process of street-children. The protagonist is a finely sketched, very real and multi-layered character. The name Ram Mohammed Thomas conveys the pluralism of India. He symbolizes every Indian's struggle since he does not have a particular regional or religious identity. As the *Literary Review* aptly comments, "His (Swarup's) vivid characterization covers the full social spectrum ... and paints a colourful, generous and admirably unvarnished portrait of contemporary India, where not all the poor are angels, not all the wealthy are villains" (qtd. in Swarup, *Q&A* blurb).

Q&A, in its subject and technique, shows the marked influence of Bollywood or Hindi cinema which forms a major part of Indian social life, reflects national realities and unites Indians across all barriers. Reel life and real life merge in *Q&A*. A number of scenes and characters are inspired by films. The novel resembles a movie packed with tragedy, comedy, action, romance, suspense and a fairy-tale ending. Ram compares every instance in his life to films. His adventures, nobility, daring chivalry and sheer luck - resemble qualities of the conventional hero in Hindi movies. Ram and his friend Salim, like most other street-children, adore movie stars. Whenever they face a challenge, they imagine how their favourite hero would react. Often the language of the characters is a literal translation of film dialogues. The novel is also influenced by reality television. The plot revolves around a television quiz which is modelled on popular game shows like *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (hosted by superstar Amitabh Bachchan) - the Indian adaptation of the Western *Who Wants to be A Billionaire?* Such shows offer millions as prize money and are tempting especially to the middle and lower classes. As Gayatri Rajwade in *The Sunday Tribune Review* concludes, "The author seems to have taken inspiration from the fantastical, unreal plots of Hindi films that

captivate and enthral millions. Drawing from the potboilers of the 1970s and commingling it with the small screen's *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, Vikas Swarup weaves a delightful yarn" (Rajwade vikasswarup.net).

Critical Review

Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* is set in twenty-first century India where the poor can only dream of a good life and where rule of law and democracy are handmaidens of the rich. In this plutocratic atmosphere, Swarup's teenage hero, a child of the slums, forges his destiny through faith and resilience, hard work and ingenuity, hope and courage, compassion and humaneness. He becomes an inspiring symbol for commoners to continue the just and brave fight against an unjust system and against cruel fate, in the belief that miracles will happen.

The novel focuses on the lives of the denizens of India's slums vis-a-vis the larger national picture. Over the decades, industrialisation, imbalanced development and rural poverty have resulted in rapid growth of slums in urban areas. Slum-dwellers have to cope with shortage of amenities, malnutrition, illiteracy, unemployment, constant fear of anti-social elements and the police. These slums witness very little government intervention except for vested interests. Slum children start working early and the hard life often makes them cynical, but some still cherish dreams of a better life. Ram Mohammad Thomas, the hero of the novel, is one such slum-kid. In his depiction of Mumbai's slums and chawls, of the poorest and the lower middle classes, Vikas Swarup deals with themes such as compassion for the less privileged as also the positive potential of the have-nots. When Ram, an illiterate slum-dweller, wins a game of knowledge, those who are expected to live and die like insects, find new voice and identity. The novel affirms that true knowledge and wisdom comes from life, not from academics, that every nameless face may have a surprising story to tell, that an ordinary person might have gone through the most extraordinary experiences. This modern day parable smashes conventional ideas of talent and genius. As Ram puts it,

> "...if the poor conducted a quiz, the rich wouldn't be able to answer a single question." (p. 29)

The novel deconstructs the grand narrative of modern India and conveys the real texture of ordinary, daily Indian life. It is a touching comment on the nation's underbelly where millions fight poverty, on the failure of the democratic polity. It deals with political corruption, economic disparity, abuse of women and children, communal tensions,

war and crime. As such, it is a novel of social protest, reminiscent of Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand, replete with indignation at injustice and abuse of power, at brazen materialism and inhumanity. Yet, the novel is never unrelentingly bleak. It is a story of the ultimate triumph of hope, virtue and perseverance, an affirmation that in spite of all its contradictions, India will go on. Suchitra Behal writes, "Rescued from a dustbin where he is dumped after his birth, Ram's life follows a singular path. One of survival in the face of great odds... *Q&A*...lets you believe in magic" (Behal vikasswarup.net). Likewise, India too survives in the face of great odds. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Vikas Swarup remarked that his theme in Q&A is the ingenuity and never-say-die spirit of India, the attitude of *jugaad* or 'whatever-it-takes to get things done', which makes everything possible (Swarup nytimes.com).

The use of themes and techniques borrowed from Indian popular cinema and reality television performs a significant role in the novel. Vikas Swarup admits that Hindi films have influenced him and he wanted to explore the life of the poor in an understated manner, as in Mira Nair's film *Salaam Bombay* (1988) (qtd. in Nair, *Deccan Herald* vikasswarup. net). The movies are a virtual paradise for the Indian poor. For three hours, they are part of a perfect world where the hero defeats all the bad guys and fulfils all his dreams. Ashis Nandy writes, "...the right metaphor for the Indian popular cinema...turns out to be the urban slum...the popular cinema is the slum's point of view of Indian politics and society...." (Nandy 1-18). The slum-dweller, though an embarrassment for the urban elite, drives the civic engines. Similarly, popular cinema is put down by art films, but, by supporting the underdog against the privileged villain, it becomes a medium of affirmation for the masses. It reflects popular consciousness and deconstructs elitist traditions. Apart from using cinematic themes and techniques, the novel is based on the format of a television quiz. As Mini Kapoor puts it, in modern India, life itself has become a publicized game-show with life stories often revealed on reality television. Ram's story must also be retold in different ways, passing through multiple filters (Kapoor vikasswarup.net). Swarup's genius lies in using the cinematic technique with refreshing originality to view contemporary India. Cinema becomes a pliable medium to transform the deeply felt experiences and keenly observed facts of life into a fictional framework. The difference between Ram's story and a good old Bollywood movie is that for Ram, a happy ending is never a surety. Swarup constantly juxtaposes real and reel life to highlight the tragic irony. This makes the novel extremely readable and easily identifiable for the commoner.

The novel attains universality by cutting across narrow boundaries and facilitating a deeper understanding of humanity. Swarup painstakingly paints the mannerisms and lifestyles, relationships and sufferings of both rich and poor. Empathy for the underdog is the essence of the novel. The tale of the street children is heart-rending. Owned by beggar masters, forced into crime, scavenging for food, sniffing glue to escape hunger, caught in gang wars, displayed like performing animals, they are starved if they do not earn enough.

Above all, *Q&A* is a tribute to the human spirit. Vikas Swarup exalts Ram as a demi-god of the marginalized, a sober optimist, a believer in good fortune. He dreams of a bright future. He gets through a hellish life unblemished, without guides or guardians. His equanimity, sharp instincts, observation, resourcefulness and prudence make him a winner. He bravely swims against powerful currents for the sake of those who count on him. His compassion involves him in the troubles of others. While this leads to suffering, it also gives him fulfilment. For him, generosity and dignity are far greater than wealth. On one hand he sees the poor dying without food or medicines, cursing the rich, the government, themselves and God. He also sees the unhappy rich squandering away currency notes like paper. He muses,

> "I wonder what it feels like to have no desires left because you have satisfied them all, smothered them with money...Is an existence without desire very desirable? And is the poverty of desire better than rank poverty itself? " (p. 296)

When confronted by enemies and a chance to kill those who had tormented his dear ones, Ram responds with sanity, rising above baser instincts. Despite all the anger and humiliation, he can only feel deep sadness. He realises that he can never be a criminal and a wise option comes to his mind. Instead of sinking into the mire of crime and vengeance, he decides to unleash the power of his well-deserved prize money in a poor country. As he puts it,

> "With a billion I can achieve many things... I can light up the lives of thousands of fellow orphans and street kids like me. I can get my hands on a beautiful red Ferrari." (p. 359)

Using the same police machinery he had evaded all his life, he delivers justice to the wronged. Street-kid Ram Mohammad Thomas who ends up owning a Mercedes and a Ferrari, who makes his dreams come true, epitomizes the positive ways of coping chosen by the ordinary Indian

today to chart his or her destiny within the larger framework of national destiny.

Struggle and Liberation in India Today

Ultimately, *Q&A* is about hope and survival. Vikas Swarup does not view slums as places of despair but as places full of industrious and energetic people trying to defeat poverty. His message has particular resonance in developing countries. When Ram throws away his lucky coin and asserts that luck comes from within, it is an assertion on behalf of all subalterns, of the citizen's victory over unjust forces and fate. *Q&A* is a novel of self-realization and self-actualization. As the *Indian Express* neatly sums it up, "For Swarup the quiz show is almost a template to tell the story of modern India. It is a depiction with a moral edge. Ram is witness to so much abuse that early on Swarup seems to be in danger of trading in stereotypes. But in the tidiness of the ending, it turns into a tale of redemption, a plea for the salience of hope, no matter how great the odds" (qtd. in Swarup, *Q&A* blurb).

5.4. Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects* (2008) –

Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects* (2008) is a riveting, modern-day crime thriller centred on the mission of India's leading investigative journalist Arun Advani to nail the murderer of the son of a high-profile Minister. Vivek 'Vicky' Rai, the playboy son of the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, who had murdered waitress Ruby Gill at a New Delhi restaurant for her refusal to serve him a drink, is shot dead at a party celebrating his acquittal. Six eccentric suspects steaming with motives, are found with guns. Their lives are narrated in rotation, leading up to the murder. In this kaleidoscopic portrait of twenty-first century India, each character represents a distinct aspect of national life. Their lives become synonymous with the story of the nation, creating a fine interplay of the personal and the national. *The Sunday Star-Times* (New Zealand) writes, "This is a sprawling novel about life and politics and corruption and greed in contemporary India. . . A breathtaking piece of writing on an epic scale" ("Rev. of Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects*" vikasswarup.net).

Six Characters – Six Faces of India

Six Suspects set chiefly in contemporary Delhi, is divided into six sections. The first section 'Murder' introduces the central event - the

famous Vicky Rai murder case. The second section 'Suspects' contains interesting profiles of the six suspects. 'Motives' delves into their intriguing motives. In 'Evidence', the tale is unravelled with the suspects either acquitted or found guilty. 'Solution' contains media analysis of the sensational case. The final part 'Confession' is a monologue by the real murderer revealing an incredibly stunning truth.

The novel opens with journalist Arun Advani's newspaper column which suggests the plutocratic nature of the Indian state where class-divisions are rife –

> "...There's a caste system even in murder. The stabbing of an impoverished rickshaw puller is nothing more than a statistic... But the murder of a celebrity instantly becomes headline news..." (p.13)

Vicky Rai exemplifies total degeneration of the polity. A Minister's son, he owns an industrial empire at thirty-two. His crimes mar every sphere. Yet, the law of the land is only a puppet in the hands of elite like him. Whether it is stock-market fraud, tax evasion, bribery, rash driving, or hunting of endangered species, he can get away with anything in a system that cannot protect brides from being burnt for dowry and young girls from being forced into prostitution. After Vicky Rai publicly shoots waitress Ruby Gill, the murder weapon disappears and all witnesses turn hostile. He has a smooth run to full acquittal and publicly celebrates it, only to be shot dead. The police launch a nationwide hunt for his killers. On the other hand, a few investigative journalists like Arun Advani fight corrupt elites. Advani's exposes, ranging from corruption in high places to pesticides in cola bottles, have toppled governments and corporates. He calls Vicky Rai the epitome of depravity in public life, 'the poster boy' for sleaze in India. He has tracked his horrifying crimes for a decade, despite death threats. But he is determined to impartially expose Rai's killer, for his crusade,

> "....was never against Vicky Rai. It was against the system which permits the rich and the powerful to believe that they are above the law. Vicky Rai was only a visible symptom of the malaise that has infected our society...." (p. 19)

The first suspect in the Vicky Rai murder case is bureaucrat Mohan Kumar, former Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh, with an unparalleled reputation for corruption and womanizing -

> "For thirty-seven years he had been in government-manipulating politicians, managing colleagues and making deals... he had acquired houses in seven cities, a shopping mall in Noida and a Swiss bank account

> in Zurich.... A man who could command the entire machinery of the state with just one phone call....” (p.24)

Post- retirement, as the director of a company owned by Vicky Rai, his lavish and unethical lifestyle continues. One day, after a séance, he is allegedly possessed by the spirit of Gandhi. He astounds all by propagating Gandhian ideals. He challenges the corruption in Vicky Rai’s firm. He fights for people displaced by big dams and for peasants and tribals whose lands are usurped by corporate projects. Following his non-violent civil disobedience movement, he ends up in jail where he converts hardened criminals. Hailed as ‘Gandhi Baba’, he has thousands of followers. He takes up the cause of waitress Ruby Gill, a Gandhian researcher slain by Vicky Rai. When the courts submit to political pressure and acquit Rai, a frustrated Gandhi Baba vows revenge. He decides to kill Rai, convinced that even Gandhiji, the apostle of non-violence, would have advocated violence to fight modern evils. But before he can do so, Rai is shot by someone else. Mohan Kumar soon reverts to his old self.

Shabnam Saxena, a popular Hindi film actress, is another suspect in the Vicky Rai murder case. She symbolises the rise of the small town girl to fame and wealth. Born into a family which considers its daughters a curse, Shabnam fights poverty, patriarchy and the sad fate of every girl in her native Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh. She reaches Mumbai aspiring to stardom and independence. Vicky Rai is one of her admirers and she resists his indecent proposals. But her life changes when a look-alike usurps her place in the film-industry. A penniless Shabnam reaches her home-town, only to find her family in dire straits and her younger sister assaulted by Vicky Rai's goons. However, Rai is killed before Shabnam can get a chance to take revenge. She ends up marrying an American in order to escape from the murder case.

Eketi, a tribal youth from the Andamans is the third suspect in Vicky Rai’s murder. In the Andaman islands in the Indian ocean, primitive tribes are exploited by bureaucrats and businessmen. Their forests and rivers are usurped or destroyed by government functionaries in the name of development. They are plagued by disease and poverty as ancient cultures and ecosystems collapse. While elder tribesmen mourn the end of a peaceful existence, the young are led astray by welfare officers into robbery, drug-dealing, alcoholism and end up in city slums. Eketi’s tribe faces a crisis when welfare officer Banerjee steals their sacred stone in order to make millions by selling it in the black market. This stone - *'ingetayi'* is a precious relic of their gods, whose absence or misuse they believe, can destroy them. Eketi follows welfare officer Ashok Rajput to India to find the *ingetayi*. In the treacherous cities, the innocent tribal

suffers on account of his dark skin, amid people blind to his integrity and skills. He is cheated by Ashok and jailed on the suspicion of being a Naxalite. Finally, learning that Vicky Rai has bought the *ingetayi*, he arrives at his farmhouse to recover it. But before he can do so, somebody shoots Rai. Falsely implicated in the murder, Eketi dies in police custody.

The brilliant thief Munna Mobile is the fourth suspect. An unemployed university graduate, he has perfected the art of stealing expensive mobile phones. He says,

> "There is no place for the poor in our metropolises. Doesn't matter how honestly you earn a living; you can still get accused of thieving and thrown into a cell because you are poor and powerless." (p.229)

Slum-kid Munna's philosophy reflects the social codes of modern India where success means compromising on ethics. Nevertheless, he appears to be more sinned against than sinning, for he faces a mighty plutocracy. He decides to abandon crime when he falls in love with Ritu Rai, daughter of Jagannath Rai, Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh and sister of Vicky Rai. Munna gets involved in a dangerous struggle to free Ritu from her powerful father and brother. Also, when Munna learns that Vicky Rai had killed his father in a fit of drunken driving, he decides to punish him. But Rai is already shot dead. Munna Mobile joins civil society movements protesting the abuse of power and fighting for the rights of the oppressed.

Jagannath Rai is ironically one of the prime suspects in his son Vicky Rai's murder. The power-hungry Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, he is the perfect specimen of the Indian politician whose powers corrupt all the three worlds! When his son Vicky violates the law, media and political opponents raise a hue and cry. When Vicky refuses to change and Jagannath Rai sees him as a threat to his power, he hires killers to eliminate him. But Vicky foils his father's plans. He is shot by someone else. Jagannath Rai subsequently loses power.

The sixth suspect is Larry Page, the American namesake of the inventor of Google. This forklift operator at a Wal-Mart store in Texas, befriends an Indian girl via the internet and decides to marry her. When he lands in India, he realises that his fiancée is the Bollywood actress Shabnam Saxena. Stunned and puzzled by the chaotic life, he slowly falls in love with India. His is a hilarious journey - getting employed as an instructor for call-centre employees because of his American accent, being dismissed by his boss Vicky Rai, being used as bait by the CIA and abducted by Kashmiri terrorists. Larry's search for Shabnam leads him to her tormentor Vicky Rai and he vows to avenge her. But by then Vicky Rai is shot. He is named a suspect in the murder, but thanks to the CIA's

witness protection programme, he marries Shabnam Saxena and both of them obtain American patronage.

The final parts of the novel titled 'Solution' and 'Confession' attempt to nail the mysterious murderer of Vicky Rai. Both the police and the media start investigating the case. The police suspect the innocent tribal youth Eketi and he dies after being tortured in police custody. Meanwhile, the media gets hold of secret tapes containing the telephone conversations of Vicky Rai's father - former Home Minister Jagannath Rai. Immediately, investigative journalists like Arun Advani expose how Jagannath Rai had hired a contract killer to kill his own son. They focus on his long misrule, urging the public to introspect about those they vote into power and the state of the Indian polity at large. Under public pressure he is arrested for the innumerable crimes he has committed and his reign of terror ends.

In the grand finale titled 'Confession', the real, elusive murderer of Vicky Rai proudly comes forward. He calls himself a committed journalist. He has no personal enmity with Vicky Rai, but is well aware of his enormous crimes, having tapped his phone calls for two years. Fully convinced that Vicky will never be punished, he becomes a vigilante to purge his nation of a demon. Knowing that Minister Jagannath Rai has hired killers to eliminate his own son Vicky, he enters Vicky's villa disguised as a bearded waiter and shoots him dead, during the party celebrating Vicky's acquittal in the Ruby Gill murder case. He escapes and the suspicion naturally falls on Minister Jagannath Rai. The murderer views himself as an anonymous revolutionary, the faceless common man, one of the many frustrated youth who desire to free India from the ‘criminal rich'. He is glad to have eliminated unholy elements.

State of the Nation: An Introspection

In *Six Suspects* Vikas Swarup cleverly employs the murder mystery format to comment on life in twenty-first century India. If Vicky Rai, the murder victim represents the degenerate polity and elite, each of the six suspects represent varied spheres of national life.

The first suspect Mohan Kumar is a retired bureaucrat who epitomises the massive corruption in the bureaucracy, destroying the vitals of the nation. He attends a so-called 'seance' with the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, organised on reality television on Gandhi's birth anniversary. The concept of the seance reveals a totally commercialised and sensationalism-hungry, gullible society which does not spare even the sacred memory of the father of the nation. The event is thronged by the glitterati and media, amid protests from Gandhians and anti-globalisation activists. The seance ends

when the medium is shot dead by a Gandhian. But, the spirit of Gandhi arrives in contemporary India through the body of Mohan Kumar.

Mohan Kumar's life has been the antithesis of Mahatma Gandhi's life in every respect. The conflict starts with the entry of Gandhi's spirit. Though his outward appearance remains the same, inwardly he assumes the persona of Gandhiji. In typical Gandhian fashion, social reform begins with personal reform. He exhorts all to avoid what Gandhi called 'the seven social sins' - Politics without Principles, Wealth without Work, Knowledge without Character, Commerce without Morality, Science without Humanity, Worship without Sacrifice, and Pleasure without Conscience. He emphasizes purity of conduct, forgiveness, generosity, austerity and love of fellow beings. Once his personal life is transformed, he turns to industry and business. He is one of the directors of Vicky Rai's mills. In order to guarantee justice to workers pitted against a greedy management, he moves a resolution based on three Gandhian principles - ethical business, business as trusteeship for public welfare and dignity of labour. The spirit of Gandhi then focuses on civil society issues. Mohan Kumar campaigns for anti-Narmada dam activists, opposes anti-poor Special Economic Zones, supports Indo-Pak peace efforts, and pickets liquor shops. He confronts vested interests that promote pornography. He uses Gandhian methods of non-violent civil disobedience. Incarcerated in Delhi's Tihar jail, he adopts Gandhian codes to convert hardened criminals. He organizes a successful non-co-operation movement demanding better conditions for prisoners. The spirit of Gandhi then moves to the final frontier - politicians. Mohan Kumar concludes that there is no peaceful solution to the problem called Vicky Rai. Deeply disappointed at the total degeneration of the polity, he decides to kill Rai. Mohan Kumar's brief tryst with Gandhi shows the necessity of and the difficulty in establishing Gandhian values in the system.

The second suspect Shabnam Saxena is a popular actress. She exemplifies the pathos of the Indian woman who struggles for liberation in a patriarchal society. As she puts it,

> "Men in India classify women into two categories-available and unavailable. The sacred cows are their mothers and sisters. The rest are fodder for their voyeuristic dreams and masturbatory fantasies." (p.42, 43)

Shabnam the celluloid goddess, exposes the world of glamour where everything is fake. She struggles to overcome her poverty and become a successful actress, but has to contend with lustful men. Politicians (like Vicky Rai) influence film-production and allotment of awards to actors. The attack on Shabnam's sister by a gangster of Home Minister Jagannath

Rai, forces her to return to her native Uttar Pradesh, a safe haven for crimes against women. To save her family, she must approach Jagannath Rai's son, the obnoxious Vicky Rai, who eyes her lustfully. She plans to kill him if necessary.

The third suspect Eketi who is an Onge tribal youth from the Andamans epitomises the apprehension of the primitive tribes of India even as their rich civilization is subsumed into mainstream culture. In the name of modernisation, the ecosystem of the Andamans is ravaged by state-backed greedy capitalists. To quote from the novel,

> "Everyday.....trucks loaded to the brim with timber rumbled down.... denuding the island of its forest cover." (p.59, 60)

The welfare measures of the government are a farce - unequipped dispensaries without staff, pathetic schools with teachers who train children to wave flags before visiting ministers. The tribals are reduced to mere exhibits. Government welfare officers are exploitative and racist. The search for the precious relic of Eketi's tribe - the *ingetayi* (the oldest engraved *shivlinga* in the world), which is stolen by a welfare officer, takes Eketi all over mainland India. He is cheated, jailed and forced to labour on construction sites. Even the wages he saves to return home are robbed. Finally, he reaches Delhi to recover the *ingetayi* from Vicky Rai. Here, he falls in love with Champi – a girl blinded by the Bhopal gas leaks of 1984. He wishes to return to Andaman with the *ingetayi* and his beloved Champi. He has had enough of India:

> '.....The people here behave as if they own the world. And they treat me like I am some kind of animal. ....every time someone calls me blackie, something curls inside me....the colour of my skin is the colour of my skin. There is nothing I can do about it.'(p. 413)

His tragic death in police custody after being falsely implicated in the murder of Vicky Rai exemplifies the sad fate of India's tribals. However, in his death, he galvanises public opinion against state apathy and injustice towards backward sections.

The thief Munna Mobile who is the fourth suspect epitomises the struggles of the poor and the deep class divides. He belongs to the Sanjay Gandhi slums of New Delhi, where tea-shop boys, car mechanics, petty thieves and maids- all dream of the 'good' life. Often they end up as abandoned corpses, tortured to death in police custody. As Munna says,

> " 'A slum is not a tourist attraction...To experience slum life, you have to be born in one'.....how a family of six manages to squeeze itself into a

> eight-by-eight-foot space. How a girl protects her modesty while bathing underneath a municipal tap in full view of hundreds of people....How grown men sit in rows and shit like buffaloes at the edge of the railway track. How the poor breed like mosquitoes and live like dogs, while the dogs of the rich sleep on Dunlopillo mattresses in mosquito-free mansions..." (p. 182, 183)

Despite having a university degree, Munna can only be a domestic servant or a store assistant, for he has no family pedigree or political connections. His tenure as a servant exposes the heartlessness of the upper class. His outwardly religious and philanthropic masters are uncouth crooks. He hints at the dangers of economic disparity when he cautions,

> "And beware a servant's revenge. There are so many elderly couples in Delhi whose throats have been slit by their Bihari cooks and Nepali guards." (p. 73)

Munna's mother, an honest sweeper adopts Champi a poor, blind and disfigured girl. She suffers genetic deformities caused by the leak of poisonous gases from a chemical factory in Bhopal in 1984. She epitomises the tardiness of the judiciary and the apathy of the government which has not punished the culprits or helped the victims. As Munna says,

> "Champi is known all over the world as the Face of Bhopal.... Crusaders...take Champi away for just one day each year... Bhopal Action Day. They ...raise awareness...by going on a huge rally....the star of the show is always Champi, who doesn't need any make-up to remind people of the horrors of Bhopal." (p.175, 177)

Munna accidentally falls in love with Ritu Rai, daughter of Home Minister Jagannath Rai and sister of Vicky Rai. When Munna pretends to be a billionaire to impress Ritu, he bridges Delhi's poorest localities and elite circles. His act satirises the epicureanism of the glitterati. Ritu Rai, treated cruelly by her father and brother, represents the subjugated Indian woman. When she plans to elope, there are references to honour killings plaguing northern India.

The fifth suspect is Vicky Rai's father and powerful politician Jagannath Rai who embodies the denigration of Indian politics. His political career is a chronicle of horrifying crimes. He is deep into communal vote-bank politics. His son Vicky Rai's corporate projects victimise tribals. He deals swiftly with opponents. While he doles out cash to blackmailers, he secretly murders sincere police officers who intercept his illegal arms consignments and then honours them posthumously. When

the uproar over his son's anti-social activities claims his Home Ministership, he aspires to the Chief Ministership through horse-trading. He even plots to kill his own son when he hinders his ambitions.

Jagannath Rai's telephone conversations reveal the workings of power in India. There are shady billionaire god men who guide corrupt ministers. The opposition leaders are petty gangsters turned capitalists who monopolise all resources. The police machinery is headed by politicians' stooges who victimise honest cops. The underworld enjoys the protection of the political class and does their dirty work. The press is largely threatened and bribed or manipulated by the powerful. The personal lives of politicians too are far from being ideal with dysfunctional families, mistresses, criminal-minded sons, enslaved daughters and so on.

The sixth suspect is the working class American Larry Page who comes to India to marry the girl he has befriended over the internet. The vibrant richness and chaos of India bewilders and fascinates him. He is often duped and forced to shell out exorbitant bribes. In a country with unending delays and lack of basic necessities, he muses,

> "The poverty of India hit me like a hammer." (p. 282)

When fork-lift operator Larry becomes, by virtue of his American accent, a professor of English for call-centre employees, the Indian call centre industry stands exposed. Indian youth eagerly adopt American identities and accents and often dupe American customers on outsourced calls. Larry is targeted for the errors of the American government and capitalists by anti-America protestors. In America too, there is much resentment against Indians stealing away jobs. When Islamic terrorists from Kashmir kidnap Larry mistaking him for an American business tycoon, the reader gets a glimpse of the beautiful Kashmir region ravaged by terrorism stemming from poverty and injustice.

Larry Page represents the universal plight of the downtrodden. His incredible Indian journey manifests extremes of wealth and poverty. His experiences give a global perspective to the Indian story - impact of globalisation, India's global image, the alliance of rulers and capitalists which exploits the poor in both developed and developing nations, the psychology of terrorists, the causes of and fight against terrorism, and the role of India in this scenario.

Towards the end of the novel where the mystery is unravelled and the murderer of Vicky Rai is exposed, the novelist laments the sorry state of the nation. The section entitled 'Solution' opens with a startling reference to the crime scene and the law and order situation:

> "A violent crime is committed in India every three minutes, a murder every sixteen. Worse, of the ninety murder cases recorded every day, the vast majority never get solved." (p. 515)

About the tapes containing Minister Jagannath Rai's dirty dealings, journalist Advani writes,

> "They also document the depths to which our polity has descended....the cynical machinations and brazen wheeler-dealing which oil the creaking wheels of democracy... They expose the sordid mess...which the probing beam of investigative reporting has either not reached or has warped into the pallid light of yellow journalism...There are no heroes in shining armour. We are all naked.....Let us resolve to cleanse the political system of criminal elements and ensure that law-breakers do not become law-makers. That is the only way to safeguard and strengthen our democracy. That is the only way to ensure a future worthy of our children." (p. 516,517,518)

The Jagannath Rai tapes lead to mass protests against the tyranny of the ruling elite. The torture and death of the innocent tribal Eketi who is labelled a Naxalite and accused of murdering Vicky Rai, is used by journalist Arun Advani to deliver a stinging blow to the government machinery. He writes of Eketi in his open letter to the President of India -

> "...he was blinded by the glare of our civilization.....but very soon he saw...the darkness....in our hearts. He was horrified by the elaborate cruelty we perpetrate on each other in the name of war and religion...shocked by the way we treat our women as sex objects...He wanted to return...to his own primitive way of life where want exists but war doesn't, where disease exists but depravity doesn't. He was an unlikely prophet, a memento mori who held up a mirror to our faces, but we did not heed him. He tried to correct us; we tried to corrupt him. He extended a hand of friendship; we chained him and manacled him. He sought our understanding; we killed him. His death serves as a precis of our culture, a withering indictment of all that is wrong with us. This is the bare truth, Madame President, and it is terrifying." (p. 532)

Advani's expose leads to public outrage and several corrupt politicians and officers are sacked. The government is forced to submit to strong public opinion. Then comes the long monologue of the anonymous killer of Vicky Rai about the sorry state of affairs in India. He sees hope in the battle of civil society against corrupt politicians. For instance, the tragic death of the tribal Eketi has prompted movements demanding justice for the subaltern.

Larger than Life Impressions

Six Suspects is an ambitious novel. The novelist expertly handles the complex plot and sub-plots spread across several locales and time-periods, achieving clarity and effectiveness in binding together the diverse strands. Despite its length, the narrative remains gripping to the end. As Vikas Swarup admits in the 'Acknowledgements' at the end of the novel: "This was a difficult book to write...The very ambition of the novel - to tell the interlocking stories of six disparate lives in a tightly schematic space - made it a daunting enterprise."

The novel presents an entertaining medley of styles from omniscient narration to first person accounts to excerpts from phone calls and personal diaries. Swarup makes his narrative layman-friendly and credible using the trappings of sensational journalism. Several portions are in the form of excerpts from newspaper columns and television news. He refers to 'Breaking News' headlines and crimes fresh in public memory, to famous newspapers, television news channels and popular journalists. Such inclusion of recent Indian history authenticates the narrative. The Bhopal Gas tragedy, the Jessica Lall murder case, the Sanjeev Nanda BMW hit and run case, the Salman Khan black buck hunting case - are all lightly camouflaged and added to the narrative, making it a multi-layered drama taken straight out of real life. If the section titled 'Motives' is full of suspense, 'Solution' and 'Confession' make skeletons tumble out of the closets of the Indian state at lightning speed, as a host of intrigues and counter-intrigues are bared. The moral ambivalence in national life is brought out well. Humour and wit, pathos and dramatic tension mark this saga of life in present-day India.

Six Suspects offers an insider's view of diverse sections of society. Each character is carefully crafted. With regard to bureaucrat Mohan Kumar, Swarup shrouds his possession by the spirit of Gandhi in mystery. It remains unclear whether it is trickery or a supernatural experience or a psychological disorder, but Swarup excels in visualising the presence of Gandhi in a nation starved of true leaders. Actress Shabnam Saxena's diary is the bitter-sweet success story of modern woman in a patriarchy. A realistic picture of India emerges wherein the ordinary are born to serve the extraordinary and stardom extracts a great price. Shabnam shines out in her dedication to her unsupportive family. In an India where womanizers are patronised by rulers, she soon realises the transience of success and life. Through the tribal Eketi, Swarup authentically portrays the Onge tribe of the Andamans, with their spirituality, medicine men (*torale*) and soothsayers, exotic rites, deep wisdom, hidden art and culture. He uses expressions from the Onge language. Eketi's journey presents

amazingly diverse India – Kolkata, Chennai, Bihar, Varanasi, Allahabad, Rajasthan and Delhi. The thief Munna Mobile's monologue is a literal translation of the language of street-smart vagabonds. His attempts to get even with the rich are hilarious. He respects his calling as a thief. Destiny plans his confrontation with Vicky Rai, but someone else kills Rai. As he puts it,

> "The RICH may live very differently from the poor, but they don't die differently. A bullet does not discriminate between a king and a pauper, a tycoon and his worker." (p. 492)

The figure of politician Jagannath Rai seems to be larger than life but is real and identifiable. Swarup effectively uses American lower class slang in the realistic portrait of the American-Larry Page. His hilarious adventures in India provide a rich source of humour.

Critical Review

Six Suspects journeys into the heart of India which generates interpretation and resists explanation. It is a rich tale of human frailties and emotions. Audaciously and astutely plotted, with a panoramic imaginative sweep, it reveals a master storyteller. The search for the murderer of a high-profile politician's son becomes a means to unravel contemporary India. The murder victim Vicky Rai epitomizes the profligacy, arrogance and contempt for the law that characterize the ruling elite. The six suspects arrested for the murder form 'a cross section of India'. That each of them has a motive to kill a politician's son suggests how politics has marred every sphere. Disturbingly, all of them opt for a violent solution, questioning the effectiveness of non-violent resistance in contemporary Indian democracy.

Vikas Swarup uses the first suspect, a corrupt bureaucrat possessed by the spirit of Gandhi to dissect the Indian political system which often subverts Gandhian values. Mohan Kumar's tale underlines the contemporary relevance of Gandhian ideology as also difficulties in its practical implementation. Swarup creates an interesting situation involving the decadent polity and corporates, the ordinary citizen, social workers and civil society groups. Amid their intrigues and conflicts, the spirit of Gandhi enters like a tempest, resolving conflicts in personal and national spheres. While predicting the massive political, economic and social changes if Gandhian ideals are reinstated, the novel also introspects if all-pervading corruption and state tyranny can be removed by Gandhian non-violent action alone and if violence is the last resort of the citizen against

mighty elitist forces in the face of the failure of governance. Interestingly, Mark Juergensmeyer writes, “Gandhi was a fighter…. ‘Where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence’, he once said, not because he welcomed bloodshed, but because he favoured engagement. He had little respect for passivity, even less for moral weakness” (Juergensmeyer ix).

The life of the second suspect who is a film actress foregrounds the struggle of the subaltern Indian woman for justice, liberty and equality. The tragic fate of the third suspect, an innocent tribal youth illustrates the suffering and struggle of India’s native tribes. Since decades, tribal communities have been victimised in the name of modernisation. According to Amara Rao, the government has grossly failed to honour the constitutional guarantees to tribals who are treated as third rate citizens at the mercy of official largesse. Insensitive development policies deprive the tribals of their traditional livelihood (Rao 4-9). K.S. Singh writes in *Tribal Communities and Social Change*, "The tribals are engaged in a struggle for survival. They seek identity, autonomy, equality, and empowerment.... moving out of their isolation to participate in all struggles, all institutions, as equals." (Singh 13) The fourth suspect, a slum-dwelling thief turned social activist symbolises the battle of the haves and have-nots. The fifth suspect, the vile politician and father of the victim, epitomizes all the vices of the nation’s decision-makers which have repercussions on millions of lives. The sixth suspect, an American national offers a unique picture of India from the perspective of the international community. A number of issues are discussed – the imperialist global economic system nurtured by the capitalist-politician alliance, racism and culture-clash in the post-colonial era, the plight of the less privileged the world over in the era of globalization, and so on.

The concluding part of the novel contains a scathing indictment of the Indian polity and also of the middle-classes who have failed to oppose tyranny and injustice. The novelist asks,

> “How long can you see what is happening around you and remain unaffected by it? How long can you pretend you are not a citizen of this country, not a thinking, feeling man?” (p.554)

He asserts,

> “....The middle class is supposed to act as the conscience of the nation, an ethical beacon guarding against the excesses of the upper class and the defeatism of the underclass. It is the middle class...which brought about the great revolutions of the world.....But not in India. Our middle class firmly believes in ...status quo. Unconcerned with declining standards in

> public life, apathetic about the plight of the poor, it indulges in rampant consumerism. We have become a nation of voyeurs, hooked on inane soap operas...mesmerized by flickering TV images of politicians caught accepting bribes on camera." (p.551)

While urging commoners to work towards a just society, the novel ends on an optimistic note, dreaming of a bright future moulded by patriotic youth who battle evil forces.

A Challenge to Indian Democracy

Six Suspects asks if the Indian polity has failed the citizen. But it also states,

> "... the buck stops with us, citizens and voters. It is our apathy and indifference that has led to the criminalization of politics and allowed mafia dons...to win elections...and convert the entire State into their fiefdom, where they can break the law with impunity." (p.517)

The anonymous murderer of Vicky Rai speaks of a new turn in Indian democracy-

> "Great revolutions begin with a tiny spark. I have lit that spark. A revolution is now underway.....Henceforth the criminal rich will no longer be able to sleep easily. They know now that retribution can return to haunt them at any time....I know I plough a lonely furrow. But I shall soldier on. Because there is still a lot of filth out there....And even murder can become addictive." (p.557, 558)

Thus, the deeply disturbing question is whether violent revolution is the only way out for the long-suffering masses who have little faith in the law. Writing of the twenty-first century in India, Arundhati Roy observes, "To some these years have brought undreamt of wealth and prosperity, to others such penury, such starvation, such despair as to render them barely human..... there has been...the dawn of a new era of people's resistance. The older, non-violent Gandhian movements have been reduced to...advocacy groups... a range of more militant struggles have loomed into view. They have...asked profound questions of the current practice of non-violent resistance. ...They believe that the threat of offering themselves up for harm...cannot prevail over an Indian state that would only be too happy to see millions of poor people annihilate themselves" (*The Shape of the Beast* vii, viii). The real challenge is to

keep the people's movement democratic, non-violent, constitutional and effective.

To sum up, as the *El Pais*, Spain, puts it, "*Six Suspects*... has unforgettable characters, a perfect plot, a sharp pace, and is set against a background of condemnation of the powerful and commitment to those less fortunate, however it goes further still in its reflection on justice and power...An equally entertaining and profound book." ("Rev. of Vikas Swarup*'*s *Six Suspects*" vikasswarup.net).

5.5. Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins* (2009)

Born into an army family in 1963 and educated at Punjab University, Tarun J. Tejpal has over three decades of journalistic experience, having worked for *India Today*, *Outlook* and *The Indian Express*. He is the founder of *Tehelka,* a news organization committed to aggressive public interest journalism. Its sting operations have exposed match-fixing scandals in cricket, the corruption in the Indian Defence Ministry in 2001 and the conspiracy behind the Gujarat riots in 2002. Subsequently, *Tehelka* had to face the wrath of the Indian state. *Business Week* magazine named Tejpal as one of the fifty leaders at the forefront of change in Asia in 2001, and as one of India's fifty most powerful people in 2009. He was lauded globally for a new brand of sting journalism that transformed Indian media. In 2010, he was presented with the *Award for Excellence in Journalism* by the International Press Institute's India Chapter Award. In November 2013, he stepped down as editor-in-chief of Tehelka after a female colleague accused him of sexual assault. He was arrested on 30 November, 2013 and is currently on bail.

Tejpal also forayed into publishing and fiction-writing. His debut novel *The Alchemy Of Desire* (2005) which passionately portrays the inner life of a writer was a critically acclaimed best-seller and won the *Le Prix Mille Pages* award. His second popular novel *The Story Of My Assassins* (2009) attempts to unravel contemporary India. His latest novel *The Valley Of Masks* (2011) deals with power, purity, dogma and humans on an inhuman search for perfection. Tarun Tejpal has made his mark as "one of the most attractive Indian writers in English of his generation", who "writes with a great deal of raw energy, inventively employing images which are at once sad, haunting, horrendously comic and beautiful" (qtd. in Tejpal, *The Story Of My Assassins* blurb).

Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* (2009) is a brutally blunt, extremely incisive and deeply sardonic comment on India today. A grand multi-layered novel set chiefly in Delhi, it exposes the massive divides of

class and caste, the darkness of the underbelly and the all-pervading codes of power and wealth. This drama of an investigative journalist and his assassins pitted against an omnipotent state, objectively chronicles contemporary India where the powerful government apparatus shapes the fate of each citizen. To quote author and critic Pankaj Mishra, "Intrepidly conceived and ingeniously executed, *The Story Of My Assassins* casts an intimate, often humorous, but always unflinching eye at the squalor of modernizing India. Combining a fierce political imagination with a tender solicitude for the losers of history, it sets a new and formidably high standard in Indian writing in English" (Mishra taruntejpal.com). Renowned novelist Nayantara Sahgal says of *The Story Of My Assassins*, "For the awesome story it tells and the stunning impact of its prose, this is, quite simply, the best Indian novel in English that I have ever read" (qtd. in Tejpal, *The Valley Of Masks* blurb).

Journey into India's Darkness

The Story Of My Assassins is several stories operating at several levels. It is the story of an unnamed, unassuming yet high-profile journalist whose expose of corruption in high places creates bloodthirsty enemies. It is also the tale of five criminals - Chaaku, Kabir, Kaaliya, Chini and Hathoda Tyagi, charged with attempting to kill the journalist. It is the saga of glittering Delhi with its activists, lawyers, media persons, corporate honchos, police officers, bureaucrats and politicians, as also of the dark underbelly of Northern India- its villages, slums, gangsters, caste and class wars, abject poverty and extreme violence, its desire for revenge and liberty. In its analysis of the interface between national and individual lives, the novel focuses on five elements - the government, the privileged, the underprivileged, the criminal and the media. The tensions emanating from their interactions narrate modern India. With the repressive socio-political machinery on one hand and the freedom-loving individual on the other, with India's legislature, executive and judiciary on one side and the journalist-narrator and his five assassins on the other, the battle becomes highly intriguing.

The novel opens in the national capital Delhi, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with a young journalist (the protagonist-narrator) receiving the shocking news that the police have foiled an attempt on his life. Overnight, this man who was being targeted by the government for exposing its corruption becomes a national hero and is provided round the clock security cover. Little does he know that he is a pawn in a much larger political game. As S. Prasannarajan says, "Suddenly, protected by

the state, he becomes part of a larger story with national consequences. He is the victim, the target, and his fate inseparable from the geopolitical destiny of his country" (Prasannarajan taruntejpal.com). The battle lines are drawn. On the one hand is his mistress Sara, a firebrand activist who fights the Machiavellian political machinery. On the other is Sub-inspector Hathi Ram, in-charge of the narrator's security, representative of a docile police force that blindly obeys those in power. There is no clue as to who tried to kill the narrator or why. He and the cops guarding him are hostages in a game of power among the rulers. The scene shifts to the Patiala House Court, where the five assassins, the men who are alleged to have tried to kill the narrator, are produced. The narrator has never seen them. His mistress Sara is certain that they are being framed as part of a deep political ploy. She allies with their defense lawyer, but, under political pressure, he soon abandons the hopelessly complicated case.

The novel then narrates the stories of the five criminals, of the nameless, faceless subaltern forced into crime. The first criminal is Tope Singh alias Chaaku, hailing from a family of army men in a remote village in Haryana. With a heartless disciplinarian for a father, he is gently goaded into crime by an affectionate uncle. Victim of poverty, ignorance and the tyranny of the village landlord, a *Rampuria* knife becomes his means of self-assertion. He earns the title of *Chaaku* (knife) by terrorizing oppressors. His rebellion has a price. Even as he escapes, the landlord, with the blessings of the police, burns his house and fields and rapes the women of his family. In Chandigarh and Delhi, in the company of smugglers and gangsters, he grows into a notorious goon, with a knife to bridge all differences. The second criminal Kabir M belongs to the minority Muslim community. His father Ghulam Masood's life has been filled with fear ever since the horrors of Partition. He strives to keep his son away from all religious affiliations:

> "His father named him Kabir....to put him beyond the lines of community and religious lacerations that shredded the land. It had been the most thought-out act of his life." (p.195, 196)

The unbearable timidity of his father and the cruel humiliation by the English-speaking elite at school makes him a rebel. He is victimised on account of his faith. His poverty affords him no secure future. He becomes a master thief and conman, never violent, happy to be brutally tortured in jail, patronized by politicians and big criminals, practising his profession with devotion and detachment. The novelist next introduces Kaaliya and Chini, master impersonators and drug-dealers. Kaaliya belongs to a tribe of renowned snake-charmers, now starving and harassed by government

officials. Chini is a Chinese boy abandoned at the Delhi railway station. They find refuge with a gang of street children, living on rail tracks and sniffing glue to fight hunger and sorrow. Their innocence destroyed by molesters, goons and policemen, almost all of them perish. As young men, Kaaliya and Chini are forced into drug-dealing and conning by crime syndicates. They often suffer inhuman torture in prison.

The fifth offender is Hathoda Tyagi, the most dreaded criminal in Northern India, "future king of Western U.P.", who kills by smashing his victims' skulls with a hammer and has a huge price on his head. Born in a village in Western Uttar Pradesh to a poor family oppressed by the rich, fury builds up inside Hathoda alias Vishal Tyagi, a boy of extraordinary strength. He is trained to be an athlete by Rajbir Gujjar, an ex-cop. However when the village landlord gets his sisters raped, his budding career ends. He smashes the skulls of the landlord's sons, earns the title of *Hathoda* (hammer) and flees the village. His trainer Rajbir helps him join the gang of Donullia Gujjar, the elusive, dreaded dacoit, a modern day Robin Hood fighting the oppression of Gujjar peasants by Tyagi landlords. Uttar Pradesh is ruled by Donullia and his political ally Bajpai. Hailed as Guruji, he ensures the security of thousands. He leads a spartan life, hiding in jungles. Guruji's goons are men of iron, working selflessly for the poor. Hathoda dedicates himself to Guruji and accepts his offer of a hard, detached life -

> "Can you kill, not out of anger and enmity and greed, but for the greater good?" (p.427)

Brave and free from avarice, Hathoda is proud to use his strength to protect the weak, eliminate oppressors and restore the balance of good in the world. Neither showy nor sentimental, he kills all over the country with his trademark brutality and escapes cleanly.

Chaaku, Kabir, Kaaliya and Chini who have never taken a human life, are summoned to assist Hathoda Tyagi in a greater mission. All the five criminals are hired to kill the narrator, who they are told, is an enemy of the Indian people, a Pakistani spy –

> "This one was for the country. This one was for all Indians." (p.463)

Amid the drama of the assassination attempt on the narrator, his professional life as a journalist is laid bare. He functions in a vitiated atmosphere wherein unprincipled corporates dictate national governance. The capitalist influence extends naturally into the media, destroying the freedom of the press. Under vicious attack from the government for

unearthing a huge food grain scam in the Agriculture Ministry, the narrator and his friend Jai are forced to seek help for their bankrupt magazine from three billionaires Chutiya-Nandan-Pandey.

Meanwhile the big expose of governmental corruption in arms deals, by a private media house, gives a new lease of life to the enslaved media. The narrator observes,

> "A bunch of guys running a website had cracked...the rules of the journalistic game. Using spy cameras, they had hauled in footage of the rich, the powerful, and the animals who work the in-between, grabbing crisp rupee notes from reporters posing as arms-dealers... politicians, generals, businessmen, government officers, presidents of major political parties...emblazoned across tens of millions of television sets across the country with their pants down... No one...knew what to do. There were swarms of newsmen buzzing around like hornets... There were politicians running around like headless chickens...Parliament had been stalled...Nothing like this had been seen before." (p.188-191)

This an oblique reference to the famous sting operation conducted by Tarun Tejpal's *Tehelka* news agency in 2001, which came as a mighty blow to the ruling class. Terrified by this expose, corrupt businessmen start investing in the media, so as to attribute the charges levelled against them as vendetta by those who feel threatened by their media-houses. These are smokescreens to eternally ward off the labyrinthine Indian justice system. Soon, the narrator's magazine is bought by an illegal arms dealer, influential in government circles, as a cover for his big deals -

> "Delhi was full of such people, who worked the surreal space between day and night, legal and illegal, government and private, national and international." (p.275)

The narrator's magazine gets financial security but at the expense of journalistic freedom, leading him to gradually lose interest in his work.

In the meantime, government functionaries fear that the narrator has seen through the attempt on his life. It is obvious that at least one motive behind the attack is to deflect attention from the massive corruption in the Agriculture Ministry which he was investigating. Even as the case against his assassins proceeds, those in power feel discomfited by his mistress Sara's attempts to undress the government. Subsequently, the narrator is summoned to the central investigative agency and asked to sign false papers stating that the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI had plotted to kill him in order to topple the government. To cover up its wrongs, the

government is bent on forcing the five assassins to confess that they are spies.

The narrator, vexed with intrigues and counter-intrigues, finds himself hemmed between a public life where definitions of right and wrong have been reversed and his own meaningless private life. His outwardly blissful family life is almost dysfunctional, with a blindly religious, domineering mother, a reticent father who buries himself in papers, and a pretty wife who can provide him no companionship. He is part of a sceptical elite society that does not believe in relationships or sentiments. A non-conformist and occasional philanderer, he seeks to escape the frenzied, shallow life. He finds solace in Guruji, his spiritual guide and Sara, his young lover. Sara, the fiery intellectual strongly opposes the fascist state. The narrator's stance is more passive, allowing things to take their own course. His Sufi Guru has a mature vision and advises that one should continue the fight against evil, for there is a reckoning beyond rules and laws, and salvation lies not in the final goal, but in the path taken to reach it. He observes,

> "Just as the temple stands between man and god, in India the government stands between man and justice." (p.383)

He views the entire political set-up as a necessary evil, with its own cycle of birth, death and rebirth, wherein both rulers and ruled are destiny's puppets.

A master story-teller, Tarun Tejpal keeps the reader readily following him through meandering plots and sub-plots until the conspiracy is unravelled. At an airport in Muscat, one Iqbalmian reveals the truth about the assassination-attempt to the narrator. Uttar Pradesh politics was controlled by dacoit Donullia Gujjar and politician Bajpai. When differences cropped up between them, Bajpai decided to kill Gujjar's right-hand man - Hathoda Tyagi. As per Bajpai's plan, Tyagi was ordered to kill the narrator. The police were ordered to shoot Tyagi on the pretext of saving the narrator. Thus the voices of those fighting against corruption or for the oppressed would be silenced, without any suspicion falling on the political class. But Tyagi pities the narrator and does not kill him. Hence, he is arrested and later killed. The novel ends with the narrator tracing the tragic ends of his assassins, closing down his magazine, taking up freelance writing and returning to his family, to a life of peace.

The Many Faces of Moral Ambivalence

The beginning of the novel offers a broad view of India on the threshold of the new millennium. Social activist Sara makes scathing comments on the state of the nation-

> "She was dismembering the new liberal economics...cursing the scope of globalization, abusing patriarchal politics, demanding lower-caste mobilization, declaring the death of the idea of India at the hands of a surging Hindu right. In five years, by 2005, this would be a fascist state..... Everything - every freedom - we took for granted would be gone. It would be worse than the colonial past, because this time we would have done it to ourselves. (p.15)

The selfish apathy of the masses is also criticised when Sara rants,

> '...we suffer from the Illusion of Normalcy.....the worst horrors take place...while we go happily about our everyday lives...' (p.15, 16)

She is more critical of the educated class when compared to the less privileged –

> '...They don't have a voice ...You have one and you barely whisper....'(p. 16)

After the assassination-attempt, the narrator uses the constant police presence around him to dissect the Indian police machinery. He portrays how struggling village lads bribe their way into the police force, ending up as servants to corrupt politicians, for the government was 'father, protector, keeper'. Sub Inspector Hathi Ram's constant refrains prove the mindless and heartless way in which policemen are forced to function. As he puts it,

> "We do what those above us in the department tell us to do... In the force these days you had to be…. a master of impersonation…. A mouse in front of seniors, an elephant in front of juniors, a wolf with suspects, a tiger before convicts, a lamb around politicians, a fox with men of money.
> .....
> No one trusts the police...were we not such eunuchs the very look of this country would change....We are only one of our great country's many illusions... ....I am a very small nut-bolt...The big machine tells me what to do..." (p.20, 38, 39, 40)

When the men who have allegedly tried to kill the narrator are produced in court, the Indian judicial system comes in for biting satire. In the frozen glaciers of the legal system, the splendour of the state lies in disarray, even as greedy and deceitful lawyers manipulate the hydra-headed monster of the law. The chaos and corruption reduce the rule of law to tatters.

The picture that emerges is of a nation controlled by fear of power, where politicians psychologically manipulate the masses, where money is worshipped and doubt and suspicion reign supreme. As Sub-Inspector Hathi Ram puts it,

> "....In this country anyone will kill...for a few thousand rupees. Sons will kill fathers, brothers will kill brothers, husbands will kill wives - what is it to kill a stranger!...." (p. 97, 98)

The life-stories of the five assassins- Chaaku, Kabir, Kaaliya, Chini and Hathoda Tyagi, testify to the oppressive atmosphere that breeds criminals. Feudalism, ignorance and brutality mar the villages. In the cities, it is treachery and conspiracy. The weak watch with maddening frustration as the strong trample upon them. The profile of Chaaku delineates law and order conditions in his native Punjab marred by indiscriminate commercialisation –

> "The state was awash with vigilantes, terrorists, criminals, compromised policemen, spooks from various central agencies....There was more illicit money and weaponry floating around in the Punjab than since the Anglo-Afghan and Anglo-Sikh wars." (p.163)

The character-sketch of Kabir projects the communal divides in the country. His father's unfulfilled dreams symbolize the desperate struggle of the minorities for a better future:

> "The father wanted his son to be a child of the new India. Modern, rational, tutored in secular ways, a wearer of pants, a speaker of English.." (p. 232)

Kabir is a classic example of the perverted psychology of a suppressed minority community that has failed to find its own identity in the national mainstream. As his grandmother says,

> "We are not Hindu or Muslim, men or women-we are just small people who can stay safe by making ourselves invisible." (p.215)

The profiles of Kaaliya and Chini show a mesmerizing grasp of the tragic subterranean world of street-children and is a poignant comment on how the nation treats its future.

The portrait of Hathoda Tyagi evokes the legends of the northern dacoits. He is the trusted lieutenant of the dreaded dacoit Donullia Gujjar alias Guruji. Guruji is a terror for the upper caste *thakurs* who had crushed Gujjar peasants for generations. The narrator observes,

> "Between the police, the upper castes and the landlords, there was enough oppression...to fuel endless platoons of...revenge seekers. Donullia offered dignity, vendetta... For men who had spent a lifetime cowering...this was an offer made by the gods. Donullia....was a secular modernist. He ran a casteless and religion-free gang." (p.405-6)

In his gang are fearsome warriors for the downtrodden who are well-provided for. Soon his philanthropy takes the form of temples, schools, colleges and hospitals. Rajbir Gujjar, the former cop and trainer of Hathoda Tyagi reveals the links among police, mafia and politicians in Uttar Pradesh. A sincere policeman, he soon learns that policing was only about politics and money. His experience as PSO (Personal Security Officer) exposes the political class:

> "If you wished to see human degradation...you needed to become a PSO. Most of the politicians they guarded were...mafia dons. They had their own armed men....Through their hands passed criminals, bribe givers, political fixers, and comfort women. The policemen were needed...to provide the curtain behind which the grimy business of public office could be conducted." (p.400)

As PSO to Bajpai, the wily, high-profile Brahmin politician, Rajbir Gujjar learns the intricacies of caste-politics:

> "Power is a greater principle than family, friendship, race, colour, religion. But caste is skin...indelible...every night...he (Bajpai) withdrew to the fastness of purity... cleansing himself with mugs of Ganga water." (p. 400, 401)

A frustrated Rajbir finally joins Guruji's gang of dacoits.

All through the biographies of the five criminals, women seem to be in the most wretched state - suppressed, humiliated, assaulted and raped in the class and caste wars. The children of the poor too are doomed to a bleak future. The novel speaks thus of village schools:

> "The school...was in a shambles...Some of the key teachers...worked on a proxy...The government...had more important things to worry about....Teaching was a luxury...sport, a joke. Village children in India are not born for the affectations of academic accents and athletics: they go to school to escape oppressive fathers and unrelenting toil." (p. 417)

Another strand of the plot explores the professional life of the protagonist as an investigative journalist who becomes famous for his expose of a huge scam in the Agriculture Ministry. He faces the wrath of the ruling class as also stiff pressure from capitalists who own media houses. This focuses on a vital aspect of modern national life - the nexus between media and corporates who virtually run the government in the era of capitalist globalization. Throughout the novel one witnesses the chaotic, pathetic circus of the Indian media, often manipulated by the rich and the powerful-

> "...media men with eyes growing out of their shoulders - a mad democracy's ever-open third eye, marrying us all in a grand collective of sorrow and celebration, lament and lust, brands and stars. The masterly sleight: conformity through freedom. What Mao and Stalin could not pull off through violence and coercion ... Nehru in 1947 had declared us a nation finding utterance - but in fifty years the utterance had become a mad clamour, a crazed babble, an unending howl." (p.18, 29)

The arrival of globalization in India is powerfully delineated. The national capital sees unscrupulous capitalism. As the rich turn every inch into a concrete jungle, the ecosystem turns hostile. Rains fail and groundwater dips. Occasional showers expose the weaknesses of the modern city as flooding paralyses life. The rich suffer stalled cars and the poor slip down uncovered manholes. The engines of national life are driven by corporates who –

> "...existed outside the grand vocabulary of state and governance and citizenship ... of privilege and responsibility. They were all men of the world, uncontaminated by any sense of …greater good… driven each moment by self-interest…" (p.179)

At the top of the corporate ladder are officially non-existent arms dealers and *hawala* agents who empty the Indian treasury into Swiss bank accounts of politicians. They are indispensable middlemen, spectral creatures working an unacknowledged business that produces mountains of cash used to monopolise national resources. This unholy alliance

between businessmen and government is exposed by a media organisation. This is a fictional re-creation of those chaotic moments in national life when the sting operation by Tejpal's *Tehelka* news agency had caught rulers accepting bribes from arms dealers on camera.

Yet another crucial strand of the plot outlines the erratic actions of the government. When the narrator unearths the massive scam in the Agriculture Ministry that cheats millions of poor, he is branded an anti-state agent. After staging an attack on him, the government guards him. Both the narrator and his assassins are used to settle scores between powerful state functionaries. One part of the plan is to shift attention from the corrupt Agriculture Ministry. This strategy involves the submissive cop, the dishonest magistrate and the omnipresent, omnipotent politician. The narrator's visit to the central investigative agency, modelled on India's Central Bureau of Investigation, exposes the government machinery - so intricate that even its operators do not understand it. Here, mechanical men obsessed with paperwork ask the narrator to sign papers which would save the guilty. The satire is pungent as one of the officers describes the government of India as a big organization which works all the time. And the narrator's friend Jai retorts:

> "The government of India is a very big organization with very small men!" (p.371)

Ultimately, the dreaded criminals who are ordered by soulless politicians to eliminate the narrator prove to be more sinned against than sinning. Politicians are described as,

> "…men who commandeered the fates of millions, outside whose doors...the influential bowed...who could transfer officials with a nod, grant licenses with a squiggle, make and break...fortunes between the taking of toast and tea." (p.30)

Ironically, gangsters wish to be more considerate than the police and more humane than the state. Even the dacoit Gujjar instructs his followers,

> "Always for the people. Not for me…Serve the people." (p.411)

Post-Modern Absurdist Narrative

The Story Of My Assassins is an ambitious novel with a vast canvas. Both with regard to theme and technique, it is a post-modern novel. There is in fact not much of a plot. What one gets is a mosaic of voices and pictures from the Indian heartland, a series of narratives, of authentic

observations about the nation. The characters are well-delineated and identifiable, with the right mix of heroism and villainy. The assassins are far more interesting, though morally, there is little to choose between them and the others. The concern with social realism is the inevitable result of Tejpal's journalistic background. But there is also the fragmentation, alienation, black humour, irony, absurdity, which characterizes the post-Rushdie generation. There is often no clear distinction between right and wrong, illusion and reality, and the resultant confusion is reminiscent of a Beckett play.

The technique combines stream-of-consciousness and linear narration. The narrative voice is acerbic. The powerful prose is full of typical North Indian flavour and coarse humour, with brilliant insights into life. The novel innovatively uses mythology and folklore to sketch its numerous and diverse characters and decipher India. The ideology of the *Gita* continues to be deeply ingrained in the national psyche, even among criminals, corrupt cops and unscrupulous businessmen. Ironically, the real values of the *Gita* are forgotten and every wrong-doer uses the ideas of *karma* or 'detached action and complete equanimity' to justify himself. In an interview, Tejpal confessed to his twenty-year struggle to find the tone to tell the kind of story he wanted: "... The English language...is a language of understatement, reserve, and coolness. But the Indian reality is anything but that - it is noisy, emotional, overheated, anarchic, swinging pell-mell between rationality and irrationality" (Tejpal, "Interview" taruntejpal.com).

Tejpal writes with empathy but can also be caustic, sceptical and even nihilistic. He seems to have lost faith in humans but not in humanity. For instance, the narrator voices the disillusionment of the post-modern human ruled by the beast of big money:

> "There was no big picture.....Maybe Gandhi was the last man to have it ...There were no grand connections. There were only endless small pieces, and all you could do was to somehow manage on your own. And everyone was struggling to do just that, uncaring of the other.....the careening, colliding small pieces - were plummeting the world down the chute." (p.472)

Yet, his Guru advises contentment, restraint and faith in ultimate justice:

> ".....We will be distinguished...not by the final destination, but the...choices we made; the paths we took. That is the miracle of free will. That is the miracle of men. The opportunity is not moksha, the opportunity is life...." (p.487)

Despite everything, humanity is still alive and a ruthless hired killer like Hathoda Tyagi can refuse to kill the narrator simply because his wife is kind to stray dogs.

Critical Review

The Story Of My Assassins is a tour-de-force through the heart of contemporary India. Its depiction of the degeneration in Indian society and polity leaves the reader shaken. At the outset, Tarun Tejpal castigates the policies of the BJP-led NDA coalition government that led to the surge of Hindu religious extremism, indiscriminate privatisation and massive economic disparities between 2000 and 2005. The tales of the five assassins are used to document the horrifying situation in Northern India, especially Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh - poverty and ignorance, lawlessness and upper-caste tyranny, unemployment, police atrocities, caste and religious conflicts, class-wars, illicit arms trade, smuggling, looting, drug-trafficking, exploitation and trafficking of women and children and so on. The failure of administration provides an ideal breeding ground for crime. Tejpal presents a new kind of subaltern - the criminals (the downtrodden forced to resort to crime) and analyses their lives, psyche, motives and roles. These gangsters either run parallel governments or form alliances with political parties. Tejpal sides with the criminals who are the products of injustice and end up as pawns of politicians. He lambasts the criminal justice system for its blatant violation of human rights. Finally, the criminal, represented by Hathoda Tyagi, is hailed as a champion of the subaltern, whereas the politician - the voice of the state, symbolized by Bajpai, stands condemned. The novelist suggests that the corrupt system is so widespread and strong that even those who oppose state fascism cannot escape being part of it.

Tejpal bares the flipside of economic liberalization and privatization in India. Capitalists end up monopolising not only national resources but also the government and the media. Such is the degradation in the polity that even matters as sacred as defence purchases are dictated by vested interests. All this is revealed through a sting operation by a media agency - a thinly veiled reference to the novelist's own media organisation named *Tehelka*. According to historian Bipan Chandra, the expose by *Tehelka*, a news-based Indian website exposed the nexus between arms dealers, army men and politicians. It was a sting operation carried out by journalists posing as arms dealers, walking around defence establishments and party offices with suitcases which had cash as well as hidden cameras and tape recorders. The video-tapes were aired on television on 13 March 2001, and

all hell broke loose. Senior army officials, the president of the BJP and close associates of the Defence Minister were seen accepting bribes and were forced to resign. The government had to appoint an enquiry committee. The government's reputation also suffered because it was widely believed that *Tehelka* was hounded and its staff and promoters were harassed and arrested (Chandra 371).

The travails and despair of Tarun Tejpal's protagonist who is a young, conscientious and enterprising journalist exemplify that the so-called freedom of the Indian press, which is run either by profit-hungry businessmen or by politicians, is a pathetic joke. Writer-activist Arundhati Roy opines, "...public opinion in 'free market' democracies is manufactured just like any other mass market product.... while...speech may be free, the space in which that freedom can be exercised has been snatched from us and auctioned to the highest bidders... free speech has become a commodity... It's available only to those who can afford it" (Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* 47-48). Tarun Tejpal himself recently said, "Good journalism is all about keeping in check the abuse of power and money....In the present context commercial impulses seem to dominate editorial impulses. And that is why I took the risk of becoming an entrepreneur and publisher..." (qtd. in "Question, but don't be disruptive, youth told" *The Hindu* 3). Infact, his motive behind founding *Tehelka* in 2000 was to provide the editorial freedom that journalists need.

The battle of the journalist and his assassins with a government run by politicians and bureaucrats who are worse than the most dreaded criminals, suggests that the Indian polity - its legislative, executive and judicial systems are on the verge of collapse. Tarun Tejpal calls attention to serious flaws in the functioning of Indian democracy. The Justice Venkatachaliah Commission (2002) appointed to review the working of the Constitution reported, "There is a fundamental breach of the constitutional faith on the part of governments and their method of governance lies in the neglect of the people who are the ultimate source of all political authority....There is, thus, a loss of faith in the governments and governance....Society is unable to cope with current events" (qtd. in Jalan 92). Renowned historian Bipan Chandra writes, "As a result of communalism and casteism, laxity in enforcement of law and order, corruption, and the use of money and muscle power in elections there has been criminalization of politics...with a nexus developing between politicians, businessmen, bureaucracy, police and criminals.....One positive development....is the growing debate in the country on the ways and means...needed to deal with the twin evils of corruption and the role of criminal elements and money power in politics" (Chandra 685).

Also, this novel views class and caste divides as a basic feature of Indian society:

> "Generation after generation learns that the equalities of the schoolroom are a delusion. You pass through the greatest educational mixer-grinder and when you emerge…what remains…intact are class, caste, religion and wealth." (p.261-262)

The underbelly of the nation is laid bare and migrant labourers are described thus:

> "… stick limbs and burnt skins and blank eyes….they carried a deep well of loss and lack and sadness and exploitation and struggle and uncertainty….Death, disease, destitution, trauma ...they were all of it." (p.133)

There is an interesting study of the codes of power and wealth that propel India.

Against the backdrop of rapid westernization of the country, the novel discusses the post-colonial dilemma which refuses to depart from the national psyche. For instance, victims of the 1947 Partition of India engineered by the British divide and rule policy state:

> '...The white Englishman can make...brothers behave like enemies....there is going to be no freedom... There is just one more game.....India and Pakistan! They will wait for us to kill enough of each other, then they will step back in.....if you are caught between a white man and a snake, run towards the snake....'(p. 209).

The caste of rich, English educated Indians created by the British dominates the four castes of Manu. And India's true low castes are the poor and defenceless pitted against each other to fulfil the agenda of the master class. The neo-colonial world economy uses local power-centres to exploit national resources. Urbanization has robbed the dignity of the farmer and the information technology revolution has reduced all human feelings to onscreen images-

> "...For centuries there had been the hunt to find a word for every image...every feeling; now we were working at finding an image for every word...every feeling.....We all picked our visuals from the universal pool. The individual monster was dead. Private passion was dead. Personal grief was dead. Anger was an icon. Love an image. Sex an organ. The future a matrix..... Even god would...be shrunk... No larger than the screen. No denser than a pixel." (p.5, 6)

The narrator's private life is beset by the emptiness of materialism. A peculiar conflict arises between the narrator and his American-educated mistress Sara who is trained to judge the world, to explain and fix everything with reason and science. But, the narrator observes,

> "There was an explanation for the universe...not to be found in the manicured beauty of purdue-brown-harvard-berkley-yale.....It lay in the inheritance of her blood; in the millennia-old meditations of naked men with matted hair...in the eternal riddles of karma and dharma that were their own answers.....If she'd listened to the inheritance of her blood she would have known the world does not need to be fixed, it only needs to be balanced. And the art of balance demands you tread lightly, not leap about in a continual frenzy." (p.94)

Tejpal delivers a final blow to the westernized class, out of touch with Indian roots and realities, when his protagonist finds self-realisation in the doctrine of *karma* and in ancient Sanskrit, the mother of all languages vanquished by colonizers. Similar views about how globalization homogenizes native cultures into a western mould, are echoed by scholar-diplomat Pavan K. Varma - "Unlike the open conquests of past empires, the globalization of today is subtle, relentless...and all-pervasive....It unfolds in an unequal world, where some countries have far greater influencing power than others" (Varma 227,239).

Thus, *The Story Of My Assassins* deconstructs India's myriad identities. Its brave attempt at a life-size sketch of India proves that India is indefinable. Though the novel has political colouring and attacks the establishment, the novelist seems largely ambivalent. He alternates between viewing the state as manipulative on the one hand and a necessary evil on the other. He views Raisina hills, the seat of power in New Delhi as a metaphor of the "imperiousness", "inscrutability" and "shallow decorativeness" of the Indian state. He remarks,

> "Any dwarf wearing the ensemble of the state could bring the tallest citizen of the country to his knees." (p.74)

The persecution Tarun Tejpal suffered due to the expose of governmental corruption by his *Tehelka* news agency deeply influences the novel. He makes a character declare,

> "The nation is a vast and complex and glorious enterprise. Any truth that does not fit into it is dangerous and anti-national and has no right to exist." (p.491)

According to Nivedita Sen, *The Story Of My Assassins* is a "serious novel that unmasks the seedy innards of our society from top to bottom and across an ample geographical space that is recognizably within the author's ambit as journalist. The acquaintance of Tejpal, the veteran editor of *Tehelka*, with corruption in high places and his understanding of how and why crime percolates down to the underbelly of society...is perhaps a fruition of years of experience in the conducting and reportage of sting operations, exposing the most outrageous, extensively discussed scams in contemporary politics and society" (Sen 59). Above all, the novel urges the Indian nation-state towards an honest re-appraisal. In a recent address to youth, Tarun Tejpal has advised them not to take freedom for granted - "The history of the freedom struggle has a major role in shaping our country and individuals. I am greatly inspired by the vision of our founding fathers, be it Gandhi, Nehru or Patel. And our policies have gone wrong only when we have deviated from their vision" (qtd. in "Question, but don't be disruptive, youth told" *The Hindu* 3).

Attacking Corrupt Power-Centres

To conclude, *The Story Of My Assassins* stands apart from many contemporary novels on the areas of darkness in modern India. Tejpal does not enjoy highlighting poverty and injustice in India; neither does he romanticize India. He depicts an India where life is brutal, dispensable, where power is measured by violence and fear, where there is no right or wrong. According to S. Prasannarajan, "*The Story of My Assassins* is an argument with power, a counter-narrative from someone who has been chosen by the State to sustain a lie." (Prasannarajan, "India Unedited" taruntejpal.com). Tejpal himself describes his novel as "a journey into the heart of power..." (qtd. in John, "The Ripper of Accepted Notions" taruntejpal.com).

Secondly, Tejpal asserts that the very nature of the novelist is to be subversive, just as it is the role of the journalist to be socially engaging (Tejpal, "Interview" taruntejpal.com). He tries to shake Indians out of their reverie. While criticising those removed from the realities of the country, the widespread inequalities and leadership crisis, he urges revolt against deceptive power-centres. Nivedita Sen opines about the novel, "The climaxes and anticlimaxes around so many lives gone wrong...make you pause ....introspecting about the kind of establishment we have smugly reconciled ourselves to and internalized...one can no longer take for granted the norms of respectability by which we live without some questioning and irony" (Sen 59). In a recent lecture to university students,

Tarun Tejpal said, "...fear has become an integral part of Indian society, and it is the crippling factor...the main reason why Indians are afraid to speak up against growing corruption... we talk of being a super power and...we have children begging at traffic signals instead of going to schools" (qtd. in "Question, but don't be disruptive, youth told" *The Hindu* 3). Above all, Tejpal's commentary on India is neither positive nor negative. For him, India is what she is, a place where 'small' people display the humanism which 'great' people lack. His impartial appraisal sides firmly with the subaltern and the rebel.

5.6. Making Sense of India Today

Jon Mee observes that post 1980, Indian male novelists have been drawn to presenting the nation on an epic scale, yet fail to reflect all aspects of national history on account of the sheer magnitude and complexity of India (Mee 35-48). In this regard, the four selected novels - Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* and *Six Suspects* and Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins*, reflect how the nation has been re-imagined as a fragmented entity or endless narrative. They share certain crucial concerns that dominate the national scene today. According to Shashi Tharoor, India stands at the intersection of four crucial debates in the new century: the bread versus freedom debate, the centralization versus federalism debate, the pluralism versus fundamentalism debate and the globalization versus self-reliance debate (Tharoor 3-4). The root causes of these debates, that is, the decaying polity and the class-conflict in a democracy that is close to becoming a dictatorship of the rich and the mighty, lie at the heart of the four novels.

First, these novels paint a gloomy picture of the political system. Contemporary Indian politics is marked by unstable coalitions, loss of accountability, the dominance of Parliament by majority parties and politicization of bureaucracy. While the judiciary crumbles under the backlog of pending cases, political parties have dictatorial and insular leaderships. The failure of the criminal justice system has resulted in soaring crime rates, fall in convictions and breakdown of law and order. Due to the failures in the public sector, the dichotomy between poor India and India shining grows. While foodgrain rots in warehouses, millions go hungry. There is an elaborate, impenetrable network of corruption extending from top to bottom.

Secondly, these novels analyze the modernizing forces of globalization that have proved to be double-edged swords. They reflect how the craze for indiscriminate urbanization leads to a rural – urban divide and

suffering for the have-nots. According to Eric Hobsbawm, "This surge of inequality ...created by the global free market in the 1990s, is at the root of the major social and political tensions of the new century" (Hobsbawm 3). While globalization brings the world closer, it also creates fierce materialism and leads to nation-states being controlled by those who dictate global markets.

Thirdly, the four novels underline that, in the era of unbridled capitalism, the Indian value system has collapsed and moral confusion prevails. Ethical principles have become subservient to wealth, power and fame.

Fourthly, the novels caution that Indian democracy is in peril unless injustice is eradicated. There is grave danger of total disillusionment with a failed system. As Arundhati Roy puts it, "In the twenty-first century, the connection between corporate globalization, religious fundamentalism, nuclear nationalism, and the pauperization of whole populations is becoming impossible to ignore. The unrest has myriad manifestations: terrorism, armed struggle, non-violent mass resistance, and common crime.....As the rift between the rich and the poor grows, as the need to appropriate and control the world's resources to feed the great capitalist machine becomes more urgent, the unrest will only escalate" (Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* 322-323).

In the final analysis, these novels that traverse the entire country are subversive novels of the underdog and question the morality of the privileged. The central idea embodied in Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Swarup's *Q&A* and *Six Suspects*, and Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* is perhaps best expressed by historian Prof. Bipan Chandra in *India Since Independence* – *"...* the challenge before the country in the new millennium is not so much of trying to achieve high levels of economic growth, as of effective governance...that would make this growth sustainable and inclusive. The challenge is for citizens, civil society movements and political parties to ensure that the state apparatuses deliver and the growth that India is witnessing translates into improvement in the quality of life of its vast millions...There is today a historic opportunity for India to meet its historic tryst with destiny and not squander it in petty communal and caste squabbles and narrow gains for its political and bureaucratic elite (Chandra 507).

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CHAPTER VI

CHARTING A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

(MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *ESCAPE* AND ARUN JOSHI'S *THE CITY AND THE RIVER*)

Some nations possess a code word which, like a key, unlocks their secrets. That word is 'liberty' in America's case; egalite, 'equality', in the case of France; for India it is 'dharma'.
—Gurcharan Das

6.1. The Future of India

The preceding chapters of this book have traced the interface between the destinies of the individual and the nation-state since 1947 when India won freedom from British rule to the present day. It is an undeniable fact that the collaboration of the citizens and the government has resulted in proud achievements and tremendous progress for the nation. At the same time, it is deeply disturbing that this development has still not translated into reality for a vast majority of Indians. There is also a sharp decline in the quality of the Indian polity. Historian Prof. Meghnad Desai writes, "When India became independent in 1947 its leaders...had high hopes that India would become a moral leader, that it would forge a path of peace and understanding in a world torn apart by enemity between West and East....But by its sixtieth anniversary India had changed - as indeed had the world...India as a nuclear power had aspirations to being a global power, not just a moral exemplar. The world was now globalized and capitalism was resurgent" (Desai 1). This naturally leads to anxiety about the future and the desire for a vision that would lead to a bright future for all the people of India.

In this context, the study of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) and Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* (1990) - novels that are nearly two decades apart, makes for an interesting analysis. While *Escape* may be read as a post-modern dystopia predicting a dark future for the nation if current shortcomings are not rectified, a return to the spiritual vision of an

older generation existentialist novelist, the late Arun Joshi, in *The City and The River,* offers a holistic solution for personal and national salvation.

6.2. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008)

Manjula Padmanabhan, born in 1953 in Delhi to a family of diplomats, grew up in Sweden, Pakistan and Thailand and was educated at Bombay University. An artist, cartoonist, playwright, short-story writer, journalist and children's author, she often deals with post-modern alienation and marginalization. Her plays include *Lights Out!* (1984), *The Artist's Model* (1995), *Sextet* (1996), *Harvest* (1998) which won the Onassis Award, and *Hidden Fires* (2003). Her cartoon strips have appeared in the *Pioneer* and the *Sunday Observer*. She has illustrated twenty-four texts and written several books for children. Her books include *Hot Death, Cold Soup* (1996), her autobiographical novel *Getting There* (1999), *This is Suki!* (2000), *Mouse Attack* (2003), *Kleptomania* (2004), *Mouse Invaders* (2004), *Doubletalk* (2005), *Unprincess!* (2005), *I am DIFFERENT!* (2007) *Where's That Cat?* (2009), *Same & Different* (2010). *Escape* (2008), her first novel for adults, was shortlisted for the Vodafone-Crossword Book Awards 2008 and is one of the few works of modern Indian science fiction.

The chief context of *Escape* is the declining sex-ratio in India that is the result of the strong social bias against the girl child and the practice of female foeticide. It presents a horrifying vision of the future where women have been completely exterminated. Giti Chandra writes, "The premise in *Escape* is simple: technology and a phobia of women have combined to create a country (clearly marked as India by the cultural detailing of clothes, food etc.) in which all females have been exterminated and a ruling class of cloned Generals keep a … grip of surveillance on the populace. Women are no longer needed for reproduction since men can clone themselves whenever they wish. They are not required for sex as homosexuality has replaced heterosexuality as the norm" (Chandra 12). *Escape* moves from its basic theme of the oppression and exploitation of woman to the relationship between woman and modern state to a universal hypothesis of the interaction between the individual and the nation-state in the era of technological perfection and capitalist globalisation.

Struggle for Life and Liberty

Escape is set in a nameless country which has undergone great changes and is ruled by cloned military Generals. They control the lives of citizens

by means of Drones or human-robots and Boyz or vicious bands of soldiers. There is no democracy or liberty in this land of ultra-modern science and technology. The entire ecosystem has been ravaged by nuclear assaults. The most significant feature is that women or 'the Vermin Tribe' are hated by the Generals and have been totally exterminated. Even words, pictures and symbols related to women are banned. One family however has secretly preserved its young daughter Meiji, the only surviving woman in the land. Her three uncles - Eldest, Middle and Youngest, are anxious for her safety. Meiji and Youngest embark on a dangerous journey to save Meiji's life. The novel revolves around this daring attempt to escape from the land of the Generals.

The novel opens amid fear and secrecy in a desolate country, peopled by emotionless half-human robots, where body and mind are enslaved. Meiji's uncles represent the sole hidden resistance against the omnipotent government. If Eldest has prophetic vision and insight, Middle is intelligent and meticulous, while Youngest with his affection and empathy is Meiji's confidant. In their underground dungeons equipped with sophisticated surveillance weapons, they keep the girl alive. Their plan of nurturing and educating Meiji is admirable but too risky. Their conversation reveals the horror of life in a tyrannical state –

> " 'That has been the fate of our entire generation', said Eldest. 'Inevitability was thrust upon us like a skewer through chunks of meat. We can choose to smile as we're exposed to the fire or we can frown – but nothing we do will alter the nature of the fire or our fate.' " (p.28)

Before the Great Change ushered in by the Generals, the uncles had been wealthy land-owners. After the Change, they had erected a vast estate with farms and mansions equipped with sophisticated technology and a dronery, an unbelievable achievement since human growth itself had been stunted by the state. They revel in the excitement of being secret rebels who can die or kill to defend Meiji. Each moment is a life and death struggle for them. The fierce ruling General and his spies keep close watch upon them. They wonder if he knows of their secret and is waiting to annihilate them. The end of Meiji is an unbearable thought for them. They doubt if they have done enough to counter their rulers, symbolic of the dilemmas and doubts of the righteous individual pitted against the system -

> "... could we have offered more resistance...all those who survived and became established in the new order. Did we have choices? Were there other paths we could have – should have taken?" (p.27)

Meiji is innocent and delicate, unaware of her sex, abiding by the rules of her uncles. A prisoner since birth, she struggles with her emotions. She does not know of an outside world. She lives in an underground mansion, equipped with every possible luxury and manned by robots designed to protect her. She is subjected to security drills but has no inkling about whom or what she is being protected from. To overcome her loneliness, she resorts to play-acting before a mirror. Playful and affectionate, she hides her sorrows though her mind bursts with queries. She is given hormone suppressants to retard her growth and even at sixteen, looks like a child. In a vain attempt to give her a normal life, young men desperate for feminine company are brought in high secrecy, kept under surveillance and shown a glimpse of Meiji. When one of them tries to see her face, he is executed as she watches in horror.

Meiji's inner turmoil mirrors the divided selves of the citizens. In a society where life is dictated by the rulers, people have lost touch with normalcy. The make-believe world cannot satisfy despite its luxuries. Even the apparently stoical uncles are starved for feminine affection. Youngest, who is closest to Meiji, struggles with his emotions as he observes her feminity. The uncles debate whether they should tell Meiji who she really is. Middle, the most practical of the three, feels that allowing Meiji to grow naturally would invite great danger. He wishes to keep her a child forever. Youngest, the most emotional of the three, feels that this would be treachery. He wants Meiji to discover herself and make an informed decision after knowing what a 'woman' is. Eldest recalls the enormous pressure they have faced in hiding her for sixteen years. Despite their best efforts, desperate suitors have come looking for her and there is constant fear of the Generals discovering her. Yet, Eldest desires to tell her the truth about her past. The three brothers ultimately decide to send their beloved Meiji away in order to save her. Youngest is chosen to accompany her on the arduous journey out of the land of the Generals. It is an extreme decision, but they have no choices.

The uncles devise an almost perfect plan of escape. A terrified and bewildered Meiji is told to start training for the journey without any questions. She is disguised as a boy and even fitted with a prosthetic penis. In a poignant scene, her uncles explain that her presence would endanger all of them. She is overwhelmed when an emotional Eldest tells her she would have to part from them to save herself –

> "You will climb out of this safe, underground seed case in which you have been germinating for so long, push your two little green leaves up out of the soil, raise your head to the sun and – thrive. That is what we all hope for you." (p.89)

After touching the feet of the elder brothers, Meiji and Youngest dressed as Indian peasants, start their journey. They first need to cross the Great Waste, a wasteland full of radioactive pollutants. They wear radioactive pressure suits and travel in a specially designed, camouflaged Desert Chariot. Meiji is eager to know the changes that await her and Youngest tells her that her journey to self-discovery would extract a great price. Even as she faces the unknown future bravely she is compassionate to fellow-beings. The challenge is for Youngest who belongs to a generation that has been denied feminine companionship, to control his forbidden desire for Meiji. Tormented by memories of his mother and sisters who were killed by the Generals, he faces the daunting task of explaining the meaning of womanhood to Meiji who would grow by years in a couple of months. His words reveal the blow to humanity inflicted by an autocratic state and the brave attempt of a citizen to preserve humaneness:

> 'I remember our... sisters.... every atom of their presence... I didn't realize at the time that an entire spectrum of gentleness and beauty would pass from this world.... I will know intuitively how to lead our little girl into that lost universe of womanhood.... Even as I fear it, look forward to it, long for it, desire it. Whatever I do it will be with my heart.... Not with cold reason, but with love.' (p.56)

Meiji and Youngest meet Wind Seeker, an old gypsy who has seen the time before the rule of the Generals. He warns about an approaching group of Boyz - the hellish clone-army of the Generals, and Youngest cleverly evades them. The humane Wind Seeker detects in Meiji the womanhood that he had never hoped to see again. He advises Youngest to disguise her as a blind boy to save her from the men of the land who are maddened by unsatiated desires. Meiji and Youngest continue trekking through the countryside ravaged by the bombs dropped by the Generals. Everything has been reduced to rubble and cement rot has set in.

They reach a deserted town named Midway where an old stationmaster presides over a half-buried railway station- the only symbol of a bygone age. In exchange for items of daily use, he offers tea and shelter to travellers. Youngest and Meiji hitch a ride on a wagon. In this parched land full of feral wild dogs, they attract envy from starving wayfarers. The resigned older men dwell with the memories of the past, but the younger men who have no pleasant memories are sad and age prematurely. Even Meiji and Youngest become hardened. Youngest berates Meiji whenever she bursts into tears. Gradually they learn to adapt to the hostile land and survive on the barest minimum. Youngest finds himself changing into a

thin, dark peasant and Meiji grows overnight into an angry adult with her own secrets.

They journey towards a dronery where cloned servants are produced, since such droneries are the only thriving establishments where basic necessities are freely available. The owner of the dronery is a hateful, lecherous old man who produces inferior drones. When he tries to molest Meiji, Youngest kills him and takes over the dronery. The old man's tortured human slaves are too glad. These young men born after the Generals took over, lack free thought or the knowledge of a world outside their own land. They wonder at the co-existence of the male and female species in other countries. For them, women are a vulgar, inferior species useful only for breeding. On the other hand Meiji, unnaturally torn out of childhood, struggles with the mysteries of existence. She is both fascinated about and hates her changing physiology and psychology. She experiences bewildering changes of mood and Youngest struggles to handle her potent sexuality. As Meiji matures into a beautiful young girl, the degenerating drones in the dronery seem even more dangerous. When the half-human, half-machine drones turn cannibalistic, Meiji and Youngest escape to the forests.

Here, Youngest tells Meiji of a world where men and women co-exist and procreation takes place through their union, where Meiji would not be a 'monster'. While defending her from the General's armies, Youngest narrates how the Generals had taken over the once beautiful country and turned it into a nuclear desert peopled by clones. As they journey deeper into the forests, they come across a once lovely island, now a garbage dump with mad islanders killing each other. Meiji is frustrated that they are unable to save the islanders. But Youngest knows how insignificant human lives are in the regime of the Generals. He recalls how his father and brothers were terrorized and raging mobs burnt his mother and sisters.

Finally Meiji and Youngest reach the City on the coastline - the edge of the General's country. The city bears all the marks of the great change ushered in by the dictatorship of the Generals- nuclear radiation, ultra-modern technology, homosexuality, limitless materialism and crime, constant electronic surveillance of private life by the state. Meiji and Youngest stay at the estate of a wealthy friend named Budget, who survives with the blessings of the Generals. The Generals constantly visit him, so they are on guard. The ruling General scans Youngest's mind through secret communication with his fellow clone Generals. Youngest introduces Meiji as his male clone. Even as the men of the city deprived of female companionship seek solace in male transvestites, Meiji has to disguise herself as an ugly man. She becomes harder to control or to hide

as she matures fast. With the onset of puberty she is attracted to young men. She hates her existence since she can never have a normal life. Youngest struggles to explain her origins to her. Finally he reveals that she is the daughter of Youngest and his cousin who had fallen in love and married during the reign of terror. Meiji's beautiful mother had immolated herself publicly in order to divert the attention of the Generals from her baby. Gradually Meiji realizes how precious she is, as the last surviving member of her species. She comes to know what a 'woman' is, though she has to hide her feminity constantly. Even as she struggles to control the powerful forces within her, she hears horrible tales of how women were killed by the Generals - foetuses, infants, children, young women, no one was spared. When she learns how her mother had sacrificed herself, she is angry with her for leaving her alone in a male world. Meiji realizes that her most powerful weapon is her mind. She vows to keep fighting as a vital link in the precious chain of life.

Living in the city, Meiji feels like a piece of raw flesh dangled before hungry lions and wishes to escape to a country where women are free. Youngest hopes to arrange a safe passage for Meiji. Despite the tight control of the Generals, there are rumours of rebellion. People try to communicate with the outside world since sophisticated technology is easily available. The outside world too struggles to contact the people of the country, to help the women escape. Meiji is distraught when Youngest tells her she would have to escape alone. As he says,

> "....I belong to a place that is no longer mentioned outside our borders. That's the price we paid for what was identified, by.....the United Nations, as the 'most extreme crime against humanity our planet has ever yet acknowledged'. The very name of our country has been deleted from the record of the civilized world. So if they're going to recognize anyone from here, on compassionate grounds, it'll only be you. That's a woman. Not a man. Not any men....You could say it's a kind of reverse justice" (p.417, 418).

Yet, Meiji is adamant that she would tell the world what Youngest had done for her and come back to take him. Youngest knows she will. The dark novel ends with a glimmer of hope.

Putrefaction of Progress

The country and government in *Escape* satirises modern nation-states, especially democracies like India which show marked signs of the tyranny of the powerful. The story of how a free country became an absolute

dictatorship ruled by a group of heartless Generals is a portent for contemporary democracies. An ambitious man had created a laboratory to clone a race of super-men. His project was supported by capitalists and politicians. He also received funds from foreign governments in return for storing their nuclear wastes. Soon, he rose to become the supreme ruler or General of the country. To ensure his immortality, he secretly created clones of himself and also powerful clone armies which would regenerate themselves endlessly. The General and his clones garnered the support of the wealthy by allowing them unlimited freedom. In order to usurp fertile lands from the commoners, the Generals and the wealthy polluted water-sources with toxic chemicals. Gradually, through technological advancements, the Generals became extremely powerful, until the rich had no option but to obey them. The Generals first ordered the extermination of all women. The problem of overpopulation and elimination of unsuitable or rebellious citizens was swiftly resolved by dropping nuclear bombs. Those who supported the Generals had safe havens; others had only death staring at them as the entire country soon turned into a radioactive wasteland.

The Generals who rule the land in the novel are absolute dictators, clones without feeling, who speak and think simultaneously, regenerating themselves without end. The Chief General is assisted by identical Co-Generals. Their minds are linked via silicon chips in their retinas. They communicate through transceivers embedded in their jaws. They live in granite fortresses. They are never seen by the outside world and lead spartan lives surrounded by stone, steel and robotic bodyguards. They are dressed in identical army uniforms, wild and restless, unable to sit still even for a moment. They appear to be suave but upon the slightest hint of disobedience or rebellion they become terrifying, shrieking and growling wild beasts. The Generals rule by creating a supernatural aura around themselves and keeping their subjects ignorant. No books or education are allowed. Their philosophy is –

> 'Perfect ignorance opens the path to perfect obedience.' (p.33)

They discourage any religion or faith for they believe it has hindered human progress. The government machinery consists of robotic soldiers trained only to follow commands. Even so, corruption and vices begin to appear among these. Citizens are not allowed mutual alliances, long-distance communication or private vehicles. They have to beg the Generals for fuel and supplies. The Generals watch citizens through space satellites that can zoom in even on specks of dust. Citizens have to choose

their names from a list issued by the Generals because conventional names denote the past of the land and hence have to be erased.

The philosophy of the Generals is revealed through their visits to the estate of Meiji's uncles, their thoughts and sayings recorded in Manuals, and the interview of one of the Generals with a foreign journalist. The Generals call themselves the 'eternal us' and assert,

> "There is only one self..... Many bodies, one self....We think as one." (p. 92)

They are sure they have attained perfection and the world will soon follow them:

> "We are the future. Fear us.....our version of reality will prevail. ....We are the logical endpoint of evolution....We have no fear of afterlives or retribution, hells or heavens. We are the past, the future and the present. We have broken through the shackles of individuality. Each one of us encapsulates infinity. We represent the next horizon of mankind. Through us, Man will scale heights previously undreamed of . . ." (p.379)

The rule of the Generals is based on the quest for supremacy and perfection. This is achieved through complete erasure of the past and of diversity, extermination of women, and creation of a generation of supposedly perfect, identical individuals through cloning technology.

The Generals practise their philosophy by destroying past civilizations – their books and architecture, infrastructure and culture, and every sign or record of their past heritage. The Generals condemn the world for wasting resources in preserving the past while millions starve. They flatten flourishing metropolises with atomic bombs and neatly erase history, geography and entire generations. Operating on the principle that men are born unequal, in quest of perfection, they kill two-thirds of the people. They describe their actions as –

> "Drain-clearing. Our world was suffocating in its own excrement. No-one could face the solution – and why? Because of a tired old myth called the 'Sanctity of Life'." (p.146)

Such genocide, the Generals feel, is a sacred act which is much misunderstood. The Generals thus chisel reality into a 'desirable' shape, using death as a tool.

A new civilization based on technological perfection is then created. The motto of the Generals is to flourish in an incorruptible world. For this, every form of diversity is destroyed and natural forms of reproduction are

banned because they might lead to race contamination or degeneration. Therefore, Nature and Woman, the sources of natural reproduction and of diversity, are viewed as threats. The Generals believe that everything must be duplicated and made replaceable. Anything that is unique or has a mind of its own, is dangerous. It is to be destroyed. Talented artists are executed and their genes are used to create clones. Even the word 'nation' is abhorrent to the ruling General, for it signifies sentiment –

> 'The word *nation* is made ugly on account of its association with *nativity*, with birth, with *nature* and by association, with excess. Nature is excessive and I abhor it for that reason.'(p. 80)

Women, since they give birth to mortal, imperfect generations, are the chief enemy of the Generals. By exterminating women, who are deemed 'the agents of mortality', the Generals claim to have conquered death. The logic of the Generals is this -

> "Females are driven by biological imperatives that lead them to compete for breeding rights. Whereas collectives breed cooperatively. In order to control breeding technology and to establish the collective ethic we had to eliminate them." (p.271)

The misogyny of the Generals is evident from the caustic words of a General who has broken the neck of a little girl hidden by her family -

> 'An ugly little wretch...with her pigtailed hair and pink, gaping mouth, wanton, already at eight years of age and wailing hideously...You were waiting only till she was old enough to breed! You'd have brought in a procession of studs to mount her, distend her belly, and pump out litter after litter of squawling wrigglers! Leaving her to collapse in blood and filth if she did not succeed....I'm kinder by far...It is from compassion that I snuff her out, this leaking vessel, this less-than-human flame....' (p.57, 58)

Under the regime of the Generals, most of the country is a desert. The water, soil and air are poisonous. The thriving capital city of twenty-five million people is now a radioactive wasteland. The Generals' atomic bombs have flattened it into rubble, killing all life forms, leaving behind hot, raging nuclear winds. More than half the population has perished and those alive are afflicted by mental and physical diseases and live in a semi-conscious state, as a result of nuclear radiation. Their lives are constantly monitored by the Generals. In the absence of women, most families have become extinct without heirs. Some agree to reproduction through cloning.

To satisfy their sexual needs, most men are forced to resort to homosexuality. The land is filled with half-dead men, soulless clones and robotic servants called drones. The chief instrument of terror of the Generals are the 'Boyz' – a hellish army of identical clones, robed in black, armed to the teeth, ready to kill at the slightest provocation. Mass produced inside the wombs of animals, they have no feelings.

The villages and towns are peopled with the wretched – rich men without the will to live, petty traders, desert robbers, poor peasants turned out of estates after their masters died without heirs. Most of the poor or the 'dust people' have been killed by the Generals. Only a few are kept alive and used to spy upon fellow-citizens. There are no buildings or structures left because of cement rot. There are no roads or railways or vehicles except for camel or bullock drawn wagons and carts rented out by suppliers. Basic necessities and commodities of daily use are scarce and secretly smuggled. In the ravaged towns, statues of Generals dot the landscape. The hypnotic music and message of the Generals is poured out over loudspeakers. People grow silent and morose, resigned to fate and wait for death. They gather to share their 'dreams' which hint at longing for the past when women still existed. Normal humans are left no choice but to degenerate in all respects. With almost every human establishment decimated, the only thriving places are licensed droneries for mass-production of cloned servants or drones. Over time, these half-human robots degenerate into terrifying species with minds of their own and the terrifying implications of cloning are revealed.

The few big cities are called the pinnacle of disciplined progress by the Generals. In the coastal city Meiji and Youngest reach, land and sea are filled with nuclear pollutants. Nuclear radiation has killed most species and those surviving appear monstrous. Due to cement-rot, everything is made of plastic or metal. The luxurious lifestyle and scientific advancement are staggering. Homosexuality is the craze. Young boys are a safely-guarded commodity and men are accompanied by transvestites. The city has boutiques, galleries, parlours, hotels and gambling dens, but no motor vehicles, parks or gardens. It deals only in virtual cash. Crimes abound. Dynamic surveillance teams of Boyz constantly pry into the homes of citizens.

The most prominent feature of the country is the absence of women. One of the first steps taken by the rulers had been to order killing of all women. The fact that women were already being victimised and their numbers were dwindling helped the dictators greatly. The ultimate reason for the extermination of women is that their minds could not be controlled by the state.

In one of their manuals analysing the women or the 'Vermin Tribe', the Generals state –

> "The drones are what the Vermin Tribe should have been: servile, dumb and deaf." (p.237)

And again,

> "They were weak. They were unfit. They were different." (p. 289)

Meiji's journey exposes the horror of a world without women. Though 'woman' has been stamped out of existence, she survives as an indelible memory, unbearably sweet and bitter. Men have horrifying memories of the public execution of women by the Generals. These images convey the unimaginable plight and tremendous spirit of women -

> "A huge figure, broad at the shoulders and broad at the hips with a rounded, generous belly. She had black hair straight to the ground. Her skin was...golden brown...and she held up...her udders in either hand, as she stood before the General.... she...howled with such fury...the ground shook. When the soldiers held her with her arms pinned back she raised her lower body with a demonic energy and spread her slit wide for all to see....a great scarlet gorge, ringed with writhing black serpents, flames shooting from it, blinding all who looked within - as she screamed, 'Fools! Fools!' even as they ran through her with their blades. She was still roaring and triumphant as she died." (p.258, 259)

The absence of women leads to desperation among young men who are ready to sacrifice anything for female companionship. Most men including the Generals seek pleasure in the company of male transvestites. Reproduction is carried out by inserting blood samples of men into half-dead animals. Some conscientious men still refuse this way of perpetuating themselves. Thus, many communities become extinct. After normal men die, the land would be filled with soulless male clones and drones. The social order is inverted - men fear each other and are tortured by memories of women. Older men long for the past and secretly communicate to the new generation that there was once a beautiful thing called 'woman'. They can sense something special about Meiji though she is in heavy disguise. Any young man who seems to be born naturally excites the suspicion of the Generals since women have been extinct for two decades. The Generals suspect Meiji's uncles of hiding a woman, because in a land where the death of women has ended the will to live, their estate alone flourishes. They frequently inspect the estate of the

uncles with ultra-modern devices. Though the uncles remind the Generals of how their clan had allowed the execution of all its women, the Generals seek to verify if they have donated their genes to produce clones.

The novelist often subtly hints at the Indianness of her nameless futuristic land. For instance, Meiji's uncles eat *rotis* and brinjal curry, bathe in rosewater, milk and steam, wear *mulmul kurtas* and *pyjamas*, eat *paan* from lotus-shaped containers and use spittoons. Again, during Meiji's journey, people have Indian names, eat Indian food- *roti, dal, khitchri, kebabs*, and are dressed like Indian peasants in vests, *pyjamas* and *chappals*. When Meiji and Youngest spend time on the sea-coast of the city, Youngest is tormented by memories of his past, of a land that curiously resembles India - the picnics, *dhurries*, camel rides, *parathas* and *chutney*, hot tea, *saris* of ladies billowing in the wind, and girls playing with the waves.

For all its so-called technological perfection, the country of the Generals has been ostracised by the world community. The United Nations has deleted the name of the country from its records for the most extreme crimes against humanity. The world has condemned all the achievements of the country and imposed a twenty year communication embargo on it. However, the Generals have no regrets. They consider their regime as one full of incomparable achievements. They boast of their ruthlessness before their citizens –

> "The past sculpts the future as surely as a scalpel carves a block of flesh. We are the result of a particular historical process. There is nothing to either condemn or celebrate in what we have achieved. We are what *we had to be*. .... Even now the outer world condemns us for what we did and continue to do. But can they touch us? No! They cannot! The corruption of their way of life, the pestilence of their interference – these evils are behind us. We are free to develop within our own genius, glorious in our isolation, unconquered in our defiance....We continue to meet resistance in hidden corners of the land, and we continue to crush it, wherever we encounter it." (p. 57)

In an interview with a foreign female journalist one of the Generals laments,

> '...it torments me....to know that our world is not admired...It is reviled and we are despised for what we have engineered. The very name of our world has been struck from the record of...other *nations*.' (p. 80)

He makes it clear that their only desire is to conquer the rest of the world and make it 'perfect' like their own country. They are indestructible and

plan to take advantage of the curiosity of the world about their land. While they do not allow any access to their own country, they keep transmitting their ideology to the world through the radio and other media.

Science Fiction of Dehumanised Modernity

Escape shows Manjula Padmanabhan's mastery over the fantasy and science fiction genres. She creates a new world wherein humans become machines and machines assume human attributes. With her complex imagination, she details the advanced scientific inventions and devices that would be the future of contemporary civilization. Padmanabhan conveys firmly albeit indirectly a strong connection to India. For instance, the clothes her characters wear are *kurtas*, chiffon veils, tunics; they eat *rotis*, curries, *lassi*, rice *pilaffs*, *paan* and smoke from *hookahs*; they listen to *taals* played on the *veena*, to the bamboo flute and the *ghatam*. The novelist refers to several typically Indian customs like touching the feet of elders to seek blessings. There is a free use of terms from the vernacular languages.

The closely-knit plot of the novel offers not only a fascinating and moving story but also an insightful study of the human psyche, of the ruthlessness of power, the limitlessness of human ambition, the inhumanity of any quest for supreme perfection, the emptiness and ghastliness of scientific progress devoid of humaneness, of man-woman relations and of the intangible essence of womanhood itself. The author combines scientific and poetic expressions in her writing. The language is simple and lucid and the emotion is genuinely soul-stirring. The oppressive and fearful atmosphere, the pathos of a living in a brutal dictatorship where both women and humaneness have been extinguished - are brought out poignantly through powerful imagery and symbolism. She goes into every tiny detail of life and the emotion associated with it. As in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, these details, especially of the adventurous journey and strategies of adaptation and survival employed by Meiji and Youngest, make the novel a highly interesting read, akin to a suspense thriller.

Critical Review

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* offers an eerie yet realistic account of personal lives vis-a-vis the tyranny of the powerful in a technologically advanced future awaiting modern nation-states like India.

This account begins by critiquing the hidden relationship of the female citizen to modern statecraft. Conventionally, there has been a deep and complex relationship between woman and the concept of nation-state. According to Ania Loomba, national fantasies (colonial, anti-colonial or postcolonial), play upon the connections between women and the land. The nation-state is often imagined literally *as* a woman. As national emblems, women are usually cast as mothers and wives, and are called upon to literally and figuratively produce the nation (Loomba 215-231). In *Woman-Nation-State*, Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis describe the various functions of women within the national context as biological reproducers of ethnic groups, transmitters of ethnic culture and participants in national struggles. According to Radhika Mohanram, "Women are the state in that they reflect and embody its power yet also function as the site upon which the state confirms its identity.... in the process of naming itself, the state has to exclude her....Thus the nation-state takes the place of the patronymic in its positioning and definition of women" (Mohanram 157-158).

The situation in the novel is only a logical extension of the treatment meted out to women in modern nation-states like India. *Escape* is a powerful exploration of the socio-cultural, political, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and other aspects related to the imbalance in the sex-ratio - a problem plaguing India. It offers a strong warning about the unimaginable terrors that humanity would have to face if the violence against women is allowed to continue unabated. Manjula Padmanabhan herself says, "In the case of *Escape*, the idea presented itself originally as a newspaper 'middle' which would take the form of a page from the diary of the last Indian woman left alive…I kept thinking that despite all the positive stuff going on, it seemed more likely that women – Indian women anyway –appeared to be on the decline. So that was the context….around 2006 I began to think of turning that idea into a novel" (qtd. in Palodkar 57-58). The extermination of women practised in *Escape* finds a direct parallel in India, where societal pressure to bear a male child forces many mothers to abort or secretly abandon female offspring. The desperate situation of men deprived of female companionship, in the novel, hints at the socio-psychological problems facing several communities in North India where female infanticide and foeticide has resulted in a scarcity of brides for men of marriageable age. When Meiji's uncles debate over whether she should be allowed to freely mature into a woman, there is some resemblance to traditional Indian society which denies women the right to shape their own lives.

The plight of women in the regime of the brutal Generals in *Escape* is a thinly-veiled attack on the attitude of Indian society and government to women. According to the 2011 census, India's current child sex-ratio is 914 females per 1000 males, which is the lowest since the 1961 census. The fall in the child sex-ratio in rural areas is around four times that in urban areas (*Competition Success Review* 86). The United Nations Children's Fund estimated that up to fifty million girls are 'missing' from India's population (*Swayam –Leaflet*). Foetal sex determination and sex selective abortion by unethical medical professionals has today grown into a multi-crore industry. The entrenched social discrimination against women has been spurred on by technological developments. The non-implementation of the Preconception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act has been the biggest failing of the campaign against sex selection (Gupta www.UNICEF/India/2007). With regard to female infanticide in India, Tandon and Sharma write, "The twin process of 'elimination of unborn daughters' and the 'slow killing' through neglect and discrimination of those that are born has become a matter of concern....Legally infanticide amounts to homicide.….yet law alone cannot root out this social problem. The girls are devalued not only because of the economic considerations but also because of socio-cultural factors....." (Tandon and Sharma 4, 8-9). India witnesses some of the most inhuman forms of violence against women- dowry deaths, rape, honour killings, domestic violence, and sexual harassment at workplaces. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) predicted that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010 ("Crime in India, 2002", *Swayam-Leaflet*, www.swayam.info). The NCRB recorded an 873% rise in rape cases between 1953 and 2011. While a case of rape is reported every twenty-two minutes, a case of bride being burnt for dowry is reported every fifty-eight minutes (cited in Sehgal, *The Deccan Chronicle* 12). The year 2012 witnessed national outrage over the brutal gang-rape and murder of a young student in the capital Delhi, only one of the countless instances of assaults on women. Existing laws have been ineffective in curbing such violence, oppression and exploitation. Government agencies exhibit a largely biased attitude towards women. The patronage of politicians shields criminals from legal punishment. The rigidly patriarchal society refuses to view women as individuals. The traditional systems of control which dictate 'what is right and proper for women' still reign supreme and reinforce the use of violent means to punish defiant female 'offenders'.

Against this backdrop, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* sets out to register a strong protest against the subordination of female citizens,

through an eco-feminist perspective. The novel takes up not only the cause of victimised womanhood but also of ecosystems ravaged by indiscriminate use of technology. Feminist and ecological movements have come to dominate the national discourse as never before, in contemporary India. They have had considerable impact in effecting change within the conventional framework. The ecofeminist ideology originated in the West and is rooted in an analogy of the biological, procreative and maternal roles of woman and Nature. It advocates that until women are freed from male domination and Nature is freed from industrial and societal assault, equitable and sustainable development would remain an empty rhetoric. According to Mies and Shiva, the ecofeminist theme is centred on countering the capitalist, patriarchal world system which is founded on three colonisations - of women, of colonies, and of Nature (Singh and Saxena 335). Pramod Parajuli opines that ecofeminist movements challenge state dominance and articulate alternate forms of governance that focus on safe and inclusive development. They transform politics through revival of civil society and subalterns (Parajuli 258-288).

As a feminist novel *Escape* suggests almost all the injustices inflicted upon the female citizens who constitute half of the population. According to Prof. B. Parvathi, "Manjula Padmanabhan belongs to that generation of Indian women writers in English who have boldly stepped out of conventions that define respectability to address issues of gender, woman, her body and its behaviour, its exploitation in a family and social setting…… Padmanabhan has opened a fresh dialogue on a new angle of feminist concerns" (Parvathi, B. 136-147). Interestingly, women's movements in India still strive for equal personal rights and equal share in governance, with the slogan 'Personal is Political'. As an ecological novel, *Escape* also takes up the cause of nature murdered by contemporary ruling dispensations. Ecological concerns do not attract much attention in poor countries like India due to immediate economic concerns. However, with massive corporate urbanisation and industrialization - deforestation, varied forms of environmental pollution, radioactive and pesticide pollution, climate change and depletion or destruction of natural resources - have reached alarming proportions, endangering entire populations and ecosystems. Civil society groups and non-government organisations continue to agitate for native communities while educating them about eco-friendly ways of living. In *Escape*, the way the Generals and the rich collaborate to destroy the women and the land for their vested interests is reminiscent of neo-colonial tendencies in the Indian polity. As Rupali Palodkar writes about the novel, "In Indian society, the ownership of

women's body and sexuality and that of land (nature) has continued to vest with men since ancient times. …There is a need...to discover an ecologically sound way of life that would not threaten the existence either of the earth or of women. That is why women writers like Manjula Padmanabhan are turning to ecofeminist thinking and are writing about the consequences of degradation of nature and woman" (Palodkar 60-61).

Against the backdrop of the dominant trends of assaults on womanhood and Nature, of the dictatorship of the rich and the mighty, *Escape* delineates the struggles of citizens against the tyranny of modern governments. The thoughts of the Generals underline the empty self-glorification of a diabolic government that prides itself on its brutality. Padmanabhan portrays a civilization that has every comfort except for happiness, where perfection only leads to grief and miraculous science ends in self-destruction. The death of diversity and erasure of cultural heritage seen here, are the by-products of capitalist globalization used by neo-colonial regimes to subdue masses. Manjula Padmanabhan views modern nation-states as institutions wherein both men and women are at the mercy of elitist, corrupt patriarchal regimes. She hints at the terrible future if these states continue with ruthless power politics which disregards humanity and natural laws. On the other hand stands the victimised citizen. Meiji's uncles embody facets essential to countering the tyrannical state. Their determination, humaneness and boldness in the face of a dehumanizing government are admirable. The novelist portrays with deep sensitivity the struggle of the uncles to explain to Meiji the meaning of womanhood, as also, her own inner struggle. As Meiji grows, the changes within her bewilder her. She is forced to suppress her feminine nature. Sadly, the efforts, courage and selflessness of the citizens seem to be futile before the might of the rulers.

However, the novelist provides a ray of hope. The grand project to defeat Nature and assume divine powers is bound to fail, for even among cloned Generals there are differences. If one is fidgety and has to be sedated even to make him rest for five minutes, the other is given to hours of silent meditation. He desires a life of peace but knows that any variation in his conduct would lead to immediate death. He finds it difficult to follow orders without thinking. When he thinks of his own end, even this emotionless clone feels sadness. The ultimate triumph of humaneness and the self-destructive nature of evil are strongly suggested.

The Quest for a Humane State

In conclusion, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* tries to create self-realization within and give voice to the marginalized women of a patriarchal society. It initiates a painful process of thinking. It attempts to reflect and alter contemporary realities which perpetuate exploitation of women. However, Padmanabhan herself says that she has never written purely as a 'feminist' (qtd. in Palodkar 56). Her writings are based on universal humanism. She suggests a strong identification between the crushed feminine and the captive nation. Ultimately, the ravaged landscape in *Escape* is a metaphor for the enslaved mind of the citizen under a tyrannical government which takes pride in skewed, exclusive development at the expense of freedom. The emphasis lies on the struggle to preserve humanity in an inhuman state. In a world where humanity has been substituted by science, the novelist portrays the inner struggle of her protagonists which is much more painful than their physical struggle against dictatorship. She narrates with empathy and restraint, the quest for liberty to shape one's destiny. She portrays the real import of womanhood and the implications of its loss. The inner conflict, unfathomable agony, searing desire and fear of death among the women hunted down ruthlessly and the men left behind is admirably captured. Amid such turmoil, the novelist creates a tender story of love. In a dystopia born out of the precedence given to technology, power and perfection over humanity, she paints the inspiring tale of Meiji's escape, a tale of the victory of the human spirit, of the ordinary individual against the greatest odds. Interestingly, 'Meiji' is a Japanese word meaning 'enlightened rule or government'.

6.3. Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* (1990)

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) was born in Varanasi to illustrious parents and was educated in India and the U.S.A. He obtained a degree in engineering from Kansas University in 1959 and a master's degree in industrial management from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1960. He also worked briefly in a mental hospital in the U.S. After returning to India in 1962, he had a brilliant career with the Delhi Cloth and General Mills. He wrote five novels - *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) which won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, *The City and The River* (1990) and a collection of short stories *The Survivor* (1975).

Arun Joshi has been acclaimed as an exceptionally perceptive psychological and philosophical novelist who has made a unique contribution to Indian English fiction. The keynote of his works is an awareness of modern man's alienation, rootlessness and anxiety in the industrialized, materialistic world and a quest for truth and fulfilment. He uses literature as a medium to explore and resolve the human existential crisis. He has been influenced by Albert Camus and other existentialists as also by Indian philosophy and spirituality.

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* is a fable of the Indian nation-state. It is different from his other novels in that it is an overtly political allegory and satire and focuses on the predicament and quest of not one individual but that of the entire country. A mixture of fantasy and prophecy, it has been hailed as a parable of the times. The City is all cities. The River is the mother of cities. The novel focuses on the battle between the victimized citizens and the corrupt, power-hungry rulers. According to Kalyan Chatterjee, *The City and The River* is "an allegory of Indian history and its mythic truth." Gita Hariharan calls the novel "a parable of political society- the endless variations of the relationship between men and power" (qtd. in S. Sharma 104).

Parable of India's People

The novel begins at its end. The Prologue depicts an old sage named The Great Yogeshwara sending his young disciple called The Nameless One to the great City as its teacher. The Yogeshwara has imparted to The Nameless One, ancient knowledge and wisdom, and the gift of self-realization. The Nameless One has grasped through austerities, the essence of the universe which is endless death and rebirth. He is now worthy to hear from the Yogeshwara the story of the great City. In this story lies the mystery of his own identity and purpose in life.

The great City on the banks of the great River is ruled by a rich Grand Master. Hailing from a family of rulers, he has a charismatic and hypnotic persona. He lives in a white-domed palace atop the picturesque Seven Hills. On these hills stand the splendid mansions and offices of the ruling elite. Next in rank come the docile brick-people living in brick colonies. Lowest of all stand the despised mud-people living on the banks of the great River. The most rebellious of them are the boatmen who bow to the River alone and refuse to salute the Grand Master. These are the 'nameless' fiery and proud people who can die for their beliefs.

The tyrannical Grand Master deludes himself that he has governed the City best. He is guided by a Council consisting of the Astrologer, the

Minister for Trade, the Education Adviser, the Police Commissioner and the Master of Rallies. Despite the deceptive strategies of the selfish ruling class, the disillusioned masses grow more mutinous. The middle classes can be fooled, but the boatmen are uncontrollable. After the Grand Master has a dream in which he is dethroned by the boatmen, he advocates harsh methods to quell their revolt.

Meanwhile the time draws near for an ancient prophecy about the City to be fulfilled. It states that a new king would rise to rule the City. The conflict between the rulers and the ruled peaks. The Grand Master and his Astrologer decide to subdue the boatmen and control their numbers by law. The Astrologer announces the draconian Triple Laws, ironically described as the path to happiness and progress - one, all citizens are to owe complete allegiance to the Grand Master; second, to ensure wealth for all, there shall be only one child to a mother; third, those disobeying the Grand Master are to be ruthlessly punished.

The boatmen refuse to follow these laws. The Astrologer holds talks with the Head of the Boatmen. She refutes the need for the Triple Laws. The boatmen can owe allegiance to none but the River, their mother. With regard to restricting the number of children, the Head declares that this is to be decided by God alone and they will not give up their children unless equality reigns. When the Astrologer speaks of too many mouths to feed, she speaks of the overflowing granaries, of how the mud-people toil night and day but cannot afford to buy their own produce. She proposes an even distribution of wealth. She mocks the theory that these laws are needed to quell the City's enemies. The enemies within are the ruling class and the enemies without have always been defeated by the boatmen's blood.

Nevertheless, the selfish Grand Master and his cowardly Councillors begin preparations to subtly turn the City into an absolute dictatorship. The fearsome Era of Ultimate Greatness is declared in order to crown the Grand Master as King. It is inaugurated by arresting a poor boatman whose wife had borne a child against the laws and a clown who had laughed at the commoners duped by the rulers. Next, police forces are used to intimidate the masses. The Police Commissioner attempts to turn his men into a bloodthirsty gang, forcing them to arrest unarmed boatmen and all who disagree with the policies of the rulers, at midnight.

Subsequently, the conflict between the rulers and the ruled reaches a decisive stage and the other major protagonists are introduced. On the one hand stands Dharma a compassionate and loyal police officer, ordered to arrest rebel leaders. On the other hand are the revolutionary leaders - Bhumiputra alias Bhoma the young iconoclast teacher of the boatmen, the wise old Hermit of the Mountain, and their disciples and comrades. By the

time Dharma and his men arrive to arrest Bhoma, he has disappeared and no one knows of his whereabouts. Bhoma is declared an enemy of the City and the rulers pursue him ruthlessly. The search for Bhoma introduces another vital element in the plot. Worried about Bhoma, his Professor - a renowned astronomer sets out on a dangerous mission to find him. The Professor desires to let the City know that his brilliant student Bhoma has been branded as a traitor for telling the bitter truth about the government. Even as the Professor represents the revolt of intellectuals against governmental tyranny, a Star in the disguise of a little boy comes to his aid. As tyranny intensifies, the boatmen organise a peaceful march on the central avenue of the City, conveying how their souls are dying due to the heartlessness of the rulers. This spectacular protest signifies that the City's fate would soon be decided and its rulers toppled. Unfortunately, the spiritually blind rulers refuse to admit their folly or rectify their errors.

As the story progresses, the novelist pits the forces of evil against the forces of good. The Grand Master's Council is full of power-hungry sycophants, eager to compromise on ethics for the sake of vested interests. The high-caste Education Adviser and the low-caste Police Commissioner plot against each other. The well-meaning Minister for Trade and Master of Rallies lack knowledge or courage to act. At the opposite end, stands the epitome of goodness, the Hermit of the Mountain. Both the Grand Master's Astrologer and the Hermit had been disciples of Yogeshwara. While the Astrologer devoted himself to temporal powers, the Hermit decided to serve the Divine and the poor boatmen. The Hermit advises the ruling class not only to be loyal, but to be loyal to the right, not only to act well, but to act truthfully.

Amid these growing tensions is set the first real confrontation between the hi-tech culture of the Grand Master and the natural ways of the boat-people. When the Grand Master sets out on his midnight rounds of surveillance and slum-razing in his ultra-modern fleet of helicopters, he sees the boatmen blockading the River with melodious laments. Furious, he burns their musical instruments with laser beams. The Grand Master faces opposition not only from the poor but also from the hitherto docile middle class. A group of young rebels, some secret, some overt, represent the resistance of the middle class- Dharma-the police officer, Dharma's Grandfather whose magical roses wither whenever the Grand Master suppresses the poor, Dharma's fiancée Shailaja, Shailaja's brother - the mystical revolutionary and Vasu the brave journalist who prints a subversive newspaper named 'The Rumblings' despite threats. When the Grand Master flies past after burning the instruments of the boatmen, Vasu shouts obscenities at him and courts arrest.

After the encounter with his opponents, the Grand Master's insecurities, arrogance and stubbornness grow. Blinded by ambition, he foolishly plans a complete takeover of the City on the day of the Festival of the River - which celebrates the immortality of Time and of the River and is a reminder of human mortality. On this day, allegiance is to be owed only to the Divine.

The Festival of the River turns into a symbol of the downfall of the City on account of the degradation of the rulers. As per the custom, the City is decked with gold buntings made by prisoners and rare flowers collected by the boatmen, symbolising the significance of the oppressed. Yet, all the glory is given to the ruling elite. The flags and giant cut-outs of the Grand Master and his family are seen all over. The middle-class or brick-people are subdued, the mud-people and boatmen sit in enclosures at the back. As the Grand Master sits upon a magnificent gold throne, the Astrologer begins sacred chants to the River. The Hermit, realising that instead of singing praises to God, the Astrologer is venerating kings, walks away in protest. Then the boatmen who are forced to wear uniforms, sail in rows and salute the Grand Master, show their protest by sticking their leader Bhoma's picture on their boats. Thus, the progressive rally of the state turns into an anti-state rally. After the boat-race, the Astrologer reminds the people that divine incarnations like the Grand Master alone can lead them to glory. Urging them to demand death for traitors like Bhoma, he forces them swear allegiance to the Grand Master. Even as the stunned crowds watch, the Astrologer anoints the Grand Master's son as the heir to his father.

The events at the Festival have far-reaching repercussions. The state clamps down fiercely on rebels. Flying Patrols arrest many brick and mud people including the Head of the Boatmen and the Professor, who refuse to take the oath of allegiance to the Grand Master. Many are sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. Meanwhile, the selfish elite like Dharma's capitalist father-in-law and the Army Chief General Starch party to celebrate the arrest of the boatmen. In the elite political circles, many feel that the talk of Bhoma's conspiracy against the City and the anointing of the Grand Master's son as heir are part of the Grand Master's plan to consolidate his own power. There is a covert yet fierce struggle for supreme power among the Grand Master's Councillors.

After these onslaughts by the state, there is resistance from the citizens. The Hermit of the Mountain openly urges the ruling class to remember their true duties and warns that unless they abandon the path of vice, doom is certain. What the Hermit preaches, the subaltern practise, led by the Head of the Boatmen. She berates police officers for persecuting the

innocent and threatens that if the boatmen are arrested, all traffic and trade on the River would stop. She prevents bloodshed by cleverly suggesting that instead of the rebel boatmen, only their photographs would be given. Soon, photographs of the rebels adorn newspapers and there is news of a huge conspiracy led by Bhoma against the Grand Master. The Astrologer orders citizens to report suspicious-looking boatmen and all those refusing the Astrologer's oath are branded as traitors who deserve no mercy. Now, the rebellion spreads fast among the awakened middle-classes or brick-people too. For instance, police officer Dharma speaks against the trickery of the Astrologer. Dharma's fiancée Shailaja's brother spreads poison against the rulers. Both young men oppose their pro-establishment fathers. Dharma's nephew Shani defies his elders and vows to avenge the boatmen. Dharma's Grandfather provides shelter to the revolutionaries.

As governmental tyranny reaches its acme, freedom of expression is taken away from the citizens and media. The Professor, representative of the intellectual class, thinks of an alternate means to broadcast the truth about the state and the rebel Bhoma. His initiative named 'The Lottery Stall' is supported by some selfless, fearless citizens. They plan to distribute free lottery tickets to the crowds and narrate to them Bhoma's story. After every thirty minutes, a draw is to be held and the prize is a dozen of Dharma's Grandfather's precious magical roses. The roses attract crowds, but the moment the Professor speaks of Bhoma's innocence and the guilt of the rulers, people flee in terror. Shailaja's brother, a disciple of Bhoma, tells the Professor that they should speak to the masses in jokes or parables, just like Bhoma used to. He narrates to the crowds 'Master Bhoma's parable'- a metaphor for the regime of the Grand Master. It tells of a king, who roamed his kingdom in invisible clothes, which were praised by all out of fear, until finally, a child called the king 'naked'. The subjects began repeating that the king was naked. Enraged, he slew them. This parable becomes a potent means of subtly conveying unpalatable truths about the rulers. The masses laugh loudly mocking their rulers. The Professor is satisfied. Shailaja's brother as he goes on repeating the parable, begins to sound like a prophet. The Grand Master orders that he be allowed to speak for seven more days and then be arrested, if the boatmen still refuse to take the oath of allegiance. Thousands throng the Stall during the seven days and the message of revolt spreads. Then the Professor and Shailaja's brother are secretly arrested, and the Stall is mowed down. There is rage and grief. The poor weep for the Stall that had given them dignity and hope. The Head of the Boatmen swears to fight the rulers till the end.

The ingenious Lottery Stall enterprise is crushed, but Bhoma's parable is told among millions and the ruling class is ridiculed. The boatmen refuse to take the oath of eternal loyalty to the Grand Master and his son, while their leader Bhoma continues to elude arrest. Even the brick-people behave wilfully. The Grand Master now enforces a 'dragnet' - a cluster of self-multiplying laws suggesting limitless tyranny. Brutality is unleashed upon commoners. The Police Commissioner orders his men to triple the number of arrests, failing which, they would be incarcerated. The Head of the Boatmen and hundreds of boatmen are jailed. The boatmen resist government forces. The nightly lists for arrests grow longer and there are terrible mix-ups. Finally, only the required number of people to be arrested each day is allotted. Police officer Dharma, trapped between his duty to the state and compassion for the suffering innocents, struggles to grasp the reality of the Grand Master he had once adored.

Finally, when the shattered boatmen agree to take the Astrologer's oath, Master Bhoma returns to their aid. The Hermit urges Bhoma to rally and heal the bleeding souls. The greatest challenge facing Bhoma is that power knows the truth, but refuses to change itself -

> "....The citizens call the king naked. The king knows he is naked but does not care. He challenges the citizens to do what they will. And the citizens know they can do nothing." (p.148)

Bhoma teaches the boatmen about the transience of despots and exhorts them to overcome their fear of the Grand Master –

> "What does your soul care if a man is powerful and a man commands the guns. Guns cannot kill you, my brothers and sisters. ....If you choose the death of your soul above the death of your body, then no one...can help you." (p. 146)

Along with the mud-people, several noble and brave brick-people like journalist Vasu and the family of Dharma join Master Bhoma. Dharma's Grandfather provides shelter to Bhoma.

The identity of Master Bhoma or Bhumiputra is now unravelled. He belongs to the mud-people and his parents were weavers. He had been orphaned in the epidemic caused by the supply of extra toxic coking-oil to the poor. He then becomes an assistant to the Professor and later, a teacher at the University. After the dictatorial New Era is inaugurated by the Grand Master, Bhoma cannot help teaching his students the bitter truth about the rulers. His students turn into anti-state rebels. He is threatened by the rulers. Finally, the Hermit reveals to a perplexed Bhoma that he has been chosen by the River to be her prophet and must embrace the path of

fearless truthful action in order to defeat evil. The Hermit consoles Bhoma saying that the Almighty would always be with him and his efforts would one day awaken the citizens or even change the Grand Master and give new life to a dying City. Bhoma chooses to give up fear and devote each action to the good of the world. He is now a liberated man, who would soldier on all alone, despite all that life would throw his way.

As the wheel of destiny turns, the conflict between the suffering citizens and the ruthless rulers intensifies. Despite the inevitable workings of fate, a 'choice' is offered to each individual. While the rebels choose to fight for the Truth, the Grand Master, despite repeated warnings, chooses to become more arrogant.

The final stage of the people's revolt takes birth in the Gold Mines, the vast underground prisons. The Head of the Boatmen, the Professor, Shailaja's brother and thousands of rebel boatmen are incarcerated here. There is resurgence among the prisoners as the rebel leaders preach to them. The Astrologer asks the Head of the Boatmen to swear allegiance to the Grand Master. But the fiery woman spits at the ruling class. Her eyes are put out and her angry screams shake the abode of the rulers – the Seven Hills. The Professor launches a fast unto death, demanding the execution of her tormentors and the release of all the innocent prisoners. He passes away exhorting non-violence and prophesying of an era of virtue and peace. Outside the prisons, The Hermit declares that the blood of the Professor has fortified the subaltern and is yet another call to the Grand Master to mend his ways.

The Professor's death shocks the City. The Grand Master gets another chance to redeem himself and the City. However, once again he consciously chooses the wrong path. He deceives the people by passing a new decree. He claims that he would do justice to all and honour the last wish of the Professor by setting free all the prisoners who are found to be innocent. The new decree is only an image-building exercise. The rule of law has been flouted for so long that none of the officials know how to file complaints or properly arrest criminals or give judgements. As a result, all the prisoners assert their innocence. No one is freed. The Grand Master smugly watches this 'jails jam' and lets the chaos continue.

Seeing the Grand Master's utter contempt for the people, Master Bhoma sinks into despair. In vain, the boatmen write petitions to the rulers. Water-cannons mow them down when they reach the Grand Master's palace. Desperate, they force Bhoma to declare civil disobedience. They refuse to work for the Seven Hills and the City built by their sweat. But the government is unmoved. The navy takes over the work of the boatmen and the murderous dragnet is further expanded. The

boatmen are forced to fight pitched battles against government forces and the City descends into civil war. Despite Bhoma's efforts, the hapless boatmen are led astray by self-seeking Councillors who use the popular uprising to wrest power from the Grand Master. For instance, the Education Adviser sends his shock-brigades to fight alongside the boatmen. Mayhem reigns as boatmen clash with police forces, raze government property and rampage the City. They break into the prisons and go wild seeing their blinded Head. The furious Police Commissioner orders his men to shoot two hundred innocent boatmen. Officer Dharma who is part of the operation suffers a mental breakdown.

As the Civil War rages, the rebels debate over violent and non-violent means. While the Head of the Boatmen seeks vengeance, Bhoma advises restraint. He sends the Boatmen's Charter of four demands to the Grand Master –

> "One, immediate withdrawal of the Astrologer's oath. Two, return of all the vanished ones. Three, a public trial of all those responsible for the Professor's death and the Headman's blinding. Four, the legalizing of the illegal children as well as the restoration of future children." (p. 187)

The Grand Master tears the Charter. His absolute arrogance and callousness dooms the City.

Even as the civil war continues, opportunistic politicians bribe the army to topple the Grand Master. The unprincipled army chief General Starch is interested only in splendour and wealth. He has an ancient parrot given by the Hermit, which is part of the prophecy about the City. It represents human consciousness and divine wisdom. However, the dim-witted General can never decipher its wise words. In return for a hefty share in the City's 'loot', General Starch and his men agree to wage profit-making wars, crush civilians and pave the way for the Trade Minister to become Grand Master.

As the battle for the City rages, events unfold mysteriously. Police officer Dharma manifests himself as the re-incarnation of a boatman. The Police Commissioner repents over his brutality and the ruthless Captain of the Flying Patrol is made the new Police Commissioner. Even as the elite continue to make merry, the mud-people fight unto death. As the time draws near for the ancient prophecy about the City to be fulfilled, divine music resounds through the cosmos. It strikes terror into the Grand Master. Desperate, he compromises with his rivals. A new Supreme Council is secretly instituted. It crowns the Grand Master as King and the Minister of Trade as the new Grand Master. The ruling class prefers monarchy over democracy. They feel that the citizens are unfit to rule themselves and

only a king can make them behave. The highest castes alone are thought fit to rule. Elections are deemed undesirable. Dynastic rule is fixed for every post for a hundred years to ensure good pedigree and stability. Image-building and hypocrisy along with tyranny are advocated. Members of the four elite classes - the royalty, the army, the traders and the academics form an alliance to crush the middle and lower classes, that is, the brick and mud peoples.

The Hermit of the Mountain realises that the end of the City is at hand. He reads the horoscope of the City prepared by his guru Yogeshwara. The prophecy says that when the King rises, the boatmen would mourn, dark shadows would cover the land, the Hermit, the teacher (Master Bhoma) and the parrot (the bird of General Starch) would die. The King has already been crowned and the other events would soon follow. The Hermit sends the horoscope to the Grand Master's Astrologer in a last attempt to save the City. He asks him to interpret a controversial line in the prophecy - 'The river, I see, from a teacher rise.' While the Hermit felt that the River would rise from the teacher, the Astrologer felt that the teacher would rise from the River. When the Astrologer asks the King for his opinion, he calls it a trifle. The truth is that the City would have been saved if the teacher (Bhoma) had been allowed to rise. But with the fall of the teacher and the rise of an evil King, the angry River River rises from the teacher and leader of the boatmen- Master Bhoma, to swallow the City.

In the last part of the story, the battle for the City rages. Endless rain pours down from the heavens and the waters of the River rise. The Education Adviser's shock-brigades desert the boatmen. They are now on their own against the omnipotent state. Their bows and arrows are no match for armoured tanks and laser-guns. They are stunned to see their huts, their mangroves and their own bodies set on fire. Their burning bodies are pushed into the River. The waters seem to be set on fire and the Hermit recalls a line from the prophecy about the City - 'Under a rain the waters burn.' On the other hand, the rulers deck the City to celebrate the coronation of the Grand Master as King. The Seven Hills are resplendent with ethereal arches of light. Fireworks and laser displays illumine the Grand Master's palace. Yet, there is no depth or meaning in the celebrations. The dilemma of the elite is expressed by General Starch who has no desire to live after the loss of his beloved parrot - the voice of righteousness. The Hermit declares that the City has chosen to embrace its doom.

Towards the end, the losing forces of goodness rally together. The solidarity of the middle class with the poorest is symbolised by Shailaja's brother. Since he is a teacher, he immolates himself in reparation for the

betrayal of the boatmen by the Education Adviser's shock-brigades which consist of students. The plight of the middle classes is exemplified by the family members of Dharma and his fiancee Shailaja who are either killed or imprisoned or assaulted. Now, the King and his men turn on their arch-enemy Bhoma, the last leader of the poor, refusing to listen to public petitions declaring Bhoma's innocence. The King's Son plans a joint attack of the army, navy and air force on Dharma's Grandfather's farm where Bhoma is sheltered. The whole place is bombed, killing all the unarmed, praying inmates including Master Bhoma, Dharma, Shailaja and Grandfather. The last defence of the boatmen falls.

The Hermit joined by the surviving mud-people performs a fire-sacrifice before the swollen River and anoints the child of the first boatman to be killed by the King as the next Hermit. A raft with a lamp rises from the River and carries the child and the City's horoscope to the abode of Yogeshwara in the mountains. The Hermit pays homage to all the martyrs. He hears the terrible sound of doom. The rising River swallows the Hermit and floods the City. The rulers immersed in hedonism are caught unawares. Soon, the River turns into a fiery sea. The Seven Hills crumble. The King and his family try desperately to escape but perish weeping in terror. It rains for seven days and seven nights and the City disappears. On the eighth day, the sun rises over a boundless ocean. Eternal justice is meted out.

Thus, the Great Yogeshwara narrates the moving tale of the City and the River to his disciple - the Nameless One. The Nameless One is none other than the child of the boatmen who had been anointed as the new Hermit of the Mountain before the fall of the City. A child of the poorest, he is divinely ordained to lead mankind to enlightenment. A new City with a new Grand Master has arisen. The new Hermit is to preach to this new City, where, as before, the rulers clash with the ruled. There is always hope that the Grand Masters would repent, that the City would purify itself of its vices through sacrifices. The novel closes with Yogeshwara exhorting the new Hermit to keep striving for the victory of good over evil-

> "....The question is not of success or failure; the question is of trying....." (p.263)

Metaphor of India's Destiny

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* is a mirror-reflection of the Indian state. The great City stands for the modern Indian nation. The River giving life to the City is the spirit of the ancient Indian civilization. The epigraph

of the novel contains an ancient prophecy about the fate of the City, deeply symbolic of the destiny of India. It contains references to a King, who epitomises tyrannical government forces and the decay in the Indian polity. The mourning boatmen in the prophecy are the poor and oppressed masses, while the teacher, the hermit and the parrot stand for the righteous forces fighting the misrule of the powerful. The prophecy also refers to dark shadows on the walls of the City and burning waters under a rain. These are symbolic of the cycle of political degradation, revolution and catastrophe in national life.

The portrait of the rulers of the City is a thinly-veiled satire on Indian politicians. The City has a Grand Master and a Council modelled on the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers in the Indian state. The suave Grand Master who hails from a family that has traditionally provided rulers to the City exemplifies the dominance of cult and dynastic politics within Indian democracy. The offices and mansions of the rulers atop the Seven Hills in the City are reminiscent of the Raisina Hills- the seat of power in the national capital Delhi.

The Grand Master is under the strong delusion that the salvation of the City lies in his hands. Beneath his attractive exterior lies an inhuman core. The insatiable desire for power makes him a lonely, suspicious man. All those who oppose his self-seeking policies are seen as enemies. For him, the only solution to poverty is to wipe out the poor. To beautify the City, he destroys slums and huts. The splendid 'Avenue Asthough' from the Seven Hills to the River is built by razing numerous homes. The homeless are told to live on the streets 'as though' in their homes. When he finds that the poor do not yield to his threats, he pitilessly unleashes the brute force of the state upon them. The protests of the masses, the sacrifices of the rebels, the advice of sages- nothing moves him. He continues to exult in decimating the forces of goodness, until the floods annihilate him, his family and all his supporters.

The Councillors of the Grand Master are self-seeking men. Though they realise his folly, they have neither the courage nor the selflessness to tell him the truth. Hand-in-glove with the elites, they appropriate all the resources. They support the Grand Master’s harsh laws and crush commoners. They constantly engage in power-struggles. As the conditions in the City deteriorate, some of the Councillors are troubled by pricks of conscience but succumb to the lure of power. Some of them even try to backstab the Grand Master. Finally, they join him in abolishing democracy in the City. They revel in their might and riches, ignoring the cries of the have-nots. Ultimately they perish along with the Grand Master.

Among the other elements of the administrative machinery, the police forces are a major instrument of tyranny. Policemen are trained to be callous to commoners and to blindly obey their superiors. The Police Commissioner epitomises the ruthlessness of the state. The Grand Master admires his cruelty and dog-like loyalty. A paranoid misanthrope, he sees guns as the solution to poverty. The walls of his office are decorated with mutilated, handcuffed hands of poor men, women and children. Since he belongs to the lower-caste, he is engaged in a constant rivalry with the upper-caste Education Adviser.

After the Grand Master imposes the Dragnet, police officers are ordered to arrest hundreds of innocent, unarmed citizens at midnight. The Police Commissioner declares,

> "We want people...who are crazy and tough. Bloodthirsty." (p.25)

Rebellious policemen like the Captain of the Flying Patrol are tortured and turned into war-machines. Conscientious officers like Dharma are misfits. A businessman advises Dharma,

> "....You must take bribes. A police officer who does not take bribes comes under suspicion. The Commissioner begins to think he is on the side of the people, more like a boatman in uniform ." (p.106, 107)

The bureaucracy loyally implements the dictates of the rulers. Even as the oppression of the masses increases, the bureaucrats start suffering from strange diseases. For instance, police officer Dharma's father - a high-ranking bureaucrat finds that every time he implements a government order, a part of his reflection disappears, until finally, he flees from mirrors for they show nothing. The doctor tells Dharma's father that he needs to exercise his dying soul, to let it follow the truth and live freely, at least once. His colleagues share the same fate. Whenever they approve a harsh law or unethical proposal, they find themselves rotting and stiffening. There is an epidemic among officials –

> "...the Three Truths Syndrome, stasis of the soul. Atrophy of the brain and locomotor functions..... It means we have turned into robots." (p. 135)

The education system is created by the high-caste Education Adviser, who was once part of the thousands of educated and unemployed youth. He rises from penury to wealth but sadly disregards his mother’s advice to guard against the temptations of power. He forms teachers and students into armed platoons called 'shock-troops' and 'shock-brigades'. Education is made the handmaiden of politics and the underworld. Students are

trained to imbibe a culture of violence. During the civil war, the Education Adviser sends his student brigades to help the boatmen, with the sole motive of usurping power. Ultimately, he abandons the boatmen and joins the Supreme Council formed by the Grand Master.

Most of the thinkers and academics live in an atmosphere of fear and suppression. The only exception is Master Bhoma, the brilliant teacher who enlightens his students about the misrule of the Grand Master. He is arrested, dismissed and declared a traitor. Then there is the renowned astronomer, the old Professor who represents the non-violent struggle of the intellectual community for liberty and for a humane state. For inspiring the masses to rebellion, he is imprisoned and dies fasting in protest against the injustice of the rulers. His death sparks outrage among the masses. Even as the civil war rages, the Education Adviser dupes the boatmen.

The profile of the soulless business community of the City is also presented. They live for illegal profits. There is an unbreakable nexus between traders and politicians. Money prevails over all laws. The way in which the Minister for Trade, the Grand Trader and Pinstripe run the economy reflects the mismanagement of national finances. Smuggling is permitted, artificial scarcity is created and prices of essentials are raised deliberately.

The Minister for Trade feels uneasy over his wrongdoings and seeks solace from the Hermit of the Mountain. However, he is too selfish and cowardly to follow the path of righteousness. Ultimately, he too succumbs to the temptation for power. He shuts himself from the sufferings of the people and there is little difference between him and the Grand Master whom he criticises. In return for his support, he is made the new Grand Master of the City.

The portrait of the Army of the City is a satire on modern warfare and the role of army leaders in modern states. The foolish Chief of the Army, General Starch, loves pomp and vanity. He hates civilians and is concerned only with safeguarding his position. He sees war, if needed, against the City itself, as the only solution. The Army complains of its poverty, the risks it faces and demands a share in the City's wealth. A hitherto docile arm of the state, it realizes its power to rule with guns, since the political leadership has failed. It has given up its culture of patriotism and discipline and is ready to fight as mercenaries for the wealthy.

In the New Era inaugurated by the Grand Master, the press is gagged and all the media agencies are owned either by politicians or capitalists. Freedom of expression is snatched away from the citizens. Even the air is owned by the Seven Hills and can only carry sounds favourable to them.

Regular tests are carried out on people to ascertain if they have been listening to subversive speeches. Those with contaminated ears are punished. There are few admirable exceptions like the underground newspaper 'Rumblings' owned by Vasu, the subversive journalist, and the Lottery Stall put by the Professor. These attempt to broadcast the truth of the City's rulers among the citizens but are defeated by the assaults of the state.

The Master of Rallies is in-charge of the media. He is famous for organizing rallies in support of his revered Grand Master. He gathers all the truths about the poor, but fear makes him forget all when he faces the Grand Master. He hates his life of falsehood, flattery and slavery. Though he successfully organises the coronation of the Grand Master's Son, he is ordered to prison for failing to telecast the event live. To avoid humiliation, he hangs himself, but the death of a fool matters little to the state.

The criminal justice system of the City is a mockery of justice. The City has vast underground prisons called The Gold Mines. These foul dungeons had once been gold mines, but now house thousands of prisoners who live in permanent darkness. Righteous men who condemn the self-glorification of the rulers are tortured here until they lose their minds. Then, their labour is exploited until they lie emaciated and huddled like animals with the night entering their souls. Above these prisons stand the imposing structures of the Seven Hills where the rulers deny any knowledge of the innocent prisoners.

The ordinary citizens of the City have a rather wretched existence. At the top of the social hierarchy are the ruling classes and the capitalists. The masses are divided into the middle-class or the brick-people and the lower-class or the mud-people. While the gullible brick-people are subdued by the cunning rulers, the miserable conditions of the mud-people make them rebellious. The mud-people toil night and day but cannot even buy food. The boatmen who work on the River and run the vital trading links are the poorest. They revolt against the unjust reign of the Grand Master. They hold their moral convictions dearer than life. The rulers feel threatened by the boatmen and attempt every possible means to crush them.

Gradually, as the tyranny of the Grand Master grows, all the fundamental rights of the citizens are snatched away. Even as the boatmen put up a stiff resistance against government forces, the middle classes too realise the gravity of the situation. The popular resistance is led by revolutionaries like the Hermit of the Mountain, Master Bhoma, the Head of the Boatmen, the Professor, Officer Dharma, Dharma's Grandfather and his nephew, Shailaja's brother, journalist Vasu and many others. They

preach spirituality, righteousness, selfless service, adherence to truth and liberation from worldly fears and desires. Though the rulers try to brutally crush the resistance, the freedom-loving masses respond with undying faith and courage, with clever and non-violent strategies of civil disobedience, which leave the rulers stupefied. However, all attempts to negotiate with the rulers end in failure. The ruthless rulers unleash monstrous weapons upon the defenceless. The citizens are forced to take to arms. The Grand Master's men massacre thousands. Divine powers intervene and Nature takes revenge. The River, the mother of the people, swallows the rulers.

Ancient, Ultramodern Novel of High Spirituality

In *The City and The River*, Arun Joshi offers a poignant, thrilling drama of the natural and the supernatural, a multi-layered parable of human life. By combining ancient mystery with ultramodern science fiction - lasers, helicopters and videos with ancient rituals and hermits, and, by fusing past, present and future, this fantasy novel assumes a rare universality.

The characters, places and events are imbued with deep symbolism. Joshi visualises the City as a microcosm of India. He interprets its struggle to salvage its destiny in allegorical terms. The novel revolves around the mythical framework of the River as the soul of the nation and the bedrock of civilisation. The River, like the river in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* or the Ganges in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* is a witness to human history, enlightening and purifying the human soul, a symbol of eternity or divinity. The torpor of modern governments is bared through a blend of science, philosophy and religion. The fact that bureaucrats fail to see themselves in mirrors proves their self-alienation and spiritual death. Another image of a spiritual wasteland is the Seven Hills. They resemble the Biblical figure, in the Book of Revelation, of the corrupt City on the evil seven hills that is destroyed in the last judgement (S. Sharma 107,111). The Hermit and Master Bhoma personify Indian spirituality. The Yogeshwara who narrates the tale of the City seems a god-like figure directing the worldly drama of life. One of the names of Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* is Yogeshwara. The Yogeshwara's disciple The Nameless One is reminiscent of the hesitant warrior Arjuna in the *Gita* or even of a Messianic figure like Christ (Dwivedi 135). Joshi also employs the myth of *srishti* (creation) and *pralaya* (destruction). Throughout the novel is heard the sound of the *tandava* dance of Lord Shiva who dances to bring *pralaya* when the world becomes sinful (Dwivedi 123). The symbol of the incessant rains and the River covering the City resembles

the Biblical floods which destroyed the sinful world. At the same time, *The City and The River* is also a futuristic novel denoting hi-tech nation-states wherein governments, media, natural resources are owned by elites, where there is disarray in state institutions, and tyranny on the part of the government machinery.

However, the skilful handling of political intrigues and detailed character sketches redeem the book from being a mere philosophical tract. The narrative is marked by wit and irony. The style is lucid and eloquent. Arun Joshi shows, as in all his works, mastery over human psychology. His novel of high spirituality explores human existence and consciousness, offering a mature solution to human misery.

Critical Review

Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* not only offers a striking glimpse of the past, present and likely future of the modern Indian nation-state, but also suggests a mature vision for personal and national redemption. It is basically a satire on the National Emergency declared by the Indira Gandhi government in India during 1975-1977, when democracy was briefly suspended. Though littered with references to this historical event, it goes beyond the particular to a universal perspective as the novelist philosophically interprets the destinies of the Indian state and its citizens. The novel offers a complete microcosm of India where corruption has eroded the government machinery and the rich and the mighty dominate public life. It dissects almost every aspect of national life from economy and education to media, prisons and security forces. Most institutions are shown to be insensitive to commoners and monopolised by politicians and capitalists. The novel castigates the failure of governments to achieve an egalitarian state and their fear of public opinion. However, amid class-divides, tyranny and a hi-tech materialistic culture, the good and the bad, the idealistic and the unprincipled co-exist in every arena. If there is ruthless power-politics, there are also forces of resistance which fight for democracy and justice. According to Brahma Dutta Sharma, ".....Arun Joshi presents the malpractices in which people wielding political power indulge and the ways in which people respond to them. Taxonomically speaking, the malpractices presented here are of two kinds: the malpractices resorted to in order to gain and retain power and the malpractices resorted to in order to eliminate dissent. The responses of the victims range from total surrender to uncompromising resistance (B.D. Sharma 241).

The City and The River stands out for its spiritual view of statecraft. From the prologue which suggests the virtues essential for leaders, to the twisted psyche of the rulers, the constant glare of the state over private lives, the soul-dead government functionaries, and the varied responses of the masses to despotism, there is one central theme in the novel – spirituality versus materialism. The novelist castigates a nation which has changed its priorities and forgotten its rich heritage and noble ethos, where the righteous are ostracised and punished, where the middle-classes blinded by narrow interests fail to oppose evil-doers, where greed has possessed people and the state expects its agents to become inhuman.

Amid all this, the Hermit of the Mountain advocates governance based on spirituality. The Hermit, the voice of the Truth, sees the ancient prophecy about the downfall of the City as a consequence of the vicious pursuit of power. Despite the dark prophecy, he believes that the people of the City have the ultimate power to decide their own destiny. Their actions will determine the final interpretation of the prophecy. The Hermit's doors are open for both the good and the bad and he preaches to both the revolutionaries and the unjust rulers. For instance, the unhappy Minister for Trade secretly visits the Hermit's hut and confesses -

> "That is where the rub lies - in action. Where one should raise standards of rebellion, one foolishly seeks compromises. Where one ought to call a spade a spade, one merely stays dumb - and hopes for the best. Where is the cure, Great Hermit?" (p.69)

The Hermit replies that the only cure is Truth. Truth is indispensable, synonymous to God, the Supreme King. It gives wisdom to rule and to choose the right ruler. It is not enough to do one's duty faithfully. One should fulfil one's responsibilities 'truthfully'. However, the practise of Truth demands selflessness and courage -

> "An empire of falsehood is created so someone can become king....The Truth ... is what destroys the falsehood at its very roots, what leaves all men free to choose as they will." (p. 112)

For the rulers, adherence to Truth would mean giving up lust for power, accepting that the law of Nature is supreme and the City would survive regardless of them. Each man claims to be a better ruler, but the truth is,

> "A man aspiring to rule this city must first learn to be the slave of the city." (p. 113)

The Hermit tells the Minister,

> "God's hand has placed you above us. Think of us before you think of yourself. .....You forget there is a Master of the World beyond the Grand Master and the rest." (p. 114)

The Hermit cautions that unless rulers give up base passions and follow the ideal of self-sacrifice, destruction is certain. Ultimately, the rulers of the City doom themselves by repeatedly silencing their own conscience.

The Hermit's teachings also inspire the forces fighting for liberty and justice. The boat-people are contented and do not believe in materialism. They seek truth and divine grace. There are characters like the Professor, Shailaja's brother and Dharma who willingly sacrifice themselves for the Truth. Master Bhoma, the fearless leader of the boatmen is taught the doctrine of spiritual liberation by the Hermit. Bhoma weighs each action of his by one standard- whether it would contribute to the welfare of his fellow-beings. When Bhoma is weakened by the assaults of mighty forces of darkness, the Hermit tells him,

> "....nothing enfeebled man more than fear...nothing but fear stood between him and his liberation....where men had thrown off this blanket of fear there alone truth had triumphed and great civilizations flourished and man had taken another step towards God....A moment comes when knowledge must realise itself in action or else become sterile....the truth ennobles both he who preaches and he who listens...it is only truth that can cut the tentacles of the shadow." (p.155, 156)

The Hermit urges Bhoma to live for the Truth without bothering about the consequences-

> "In the great hand of God we stand, and can only do our best. For the rest, it His Law and His Will." (p. 157)

Thus, *The City and The River* seeks to resurrect the forgotten humane ethos of Indian civilization. As the novel observes,

> "Everyone is thousands and thousands of years old, tied as we are to the wheel of karma. Unfortunately, we forget this. Kings and Grand Masters forget this the most. That is the world's misfortune." (p. 42)

The novelist eloquently and lucidly sets out the fundamentals of the ideal nation, the ideal ruler and the ideal citizen. Moral fibre is upheld as the panacea for all ills of governance. The supremacy of soul force and realisation of the true nature of the human soul are dominant themes. The attempt to reconcile spirituality and governance and make godliness the foundation of national life echoes Gandhian philosophy.

The philosophy of *The City and The River* seems indispensable for modern India. Renowned political scientist Rajni Kothari writes that Indian democracy has declined because of a crisis of values. In the years immediately after independence, the inspiring example of the founding fathers provided the polity with high moral standards and exemplary leaders. But over the years, in the absence of a larger ethical code, politics degenerated into a cold and cynical exercise in control and manipulation, ultimately resulting in its takeover by musclemen and mafias. In the ultimate analysis, Gandhi was right that politics and religion are closely intertwined. Either the state is an instrument of morality or it is made into an instrument of some positivist force, be it progress or national glory or individual glory. Whenever the state is shorn of the moral imperative and the nuances and controls that go with it, it becomes totalitarian - no matter what its legal constitution may be (Kothari 125 - 127).

Arun Joshi's novel also advocates a vital role for citizens and civil society in resisting tyranny and creating a better national future. It condemns those who remain mute spectators. The apathy and ignorance of the middle classes are repeatedly satirised by the novelist. Fear and selfishness which keep man away from the truth, are seen as the root cause of the citizen's slavery. A thinking man who seeks the truth is a danger to unscrupulous rulers and is therefore quickly silenced. Fearless, selfless and right action alone can liberate the citizen and defeat despots. Suggested throughout the novel is the metaphor of the rise and the fall of kings, of the struggle between the rulers and the ruled, the conformists and the rebels - that has deep connotations for modern statecraft and citizenship. The novelist documents the myriad ways in which the powerful subjugate the weak and also the innovative methods of resistance devised by the subaltern. The eternal value of sacrifices made by martyrs for the nation is emphasized. These inspire the downtrodden to fight without losing hope or courage.

In this context, the novel also deals with the conflict between violent and non-violent means of resistance. It hints at the futility of non-violent resistance in the modern nation-state which commands fathomless resources and heartless men. At the same time, the novelist has doubts about violence as a lasting solution. As Arundhati Roy opines, "Every day....more and more people are rising up in myriad ways, massing into a colossal wave of resistance.... The government's reaction has been to meet this uprising with police-firings, arrests, with threats to call out the army, and if necessary, the air force. New laws have been pushed through. They make every kind of dissent....a criminal offence.... our hollow-to-begin-

with democracy has begun to devolve into an elaborately administered tyranny" (*The Shape of the Beast* viii).

Ultimately, the novelist suggests that the conflict between good and evil is a universal existential problem. The rise and fall of regimes is inevitable. Suffering and decay are the destiny of mankind. However, Arun Joshi uses the ancient prophecy about the City to demonstrate that the individual has the power to decide national destiny. As the Hermit says,

> "Cities, my children, even as men, make their own horoscopes." (p. 217)

Most importantly, Joshi offers a way out of the endless cycle of misery for both the individual and the nation. This is the path of sacrifice. As the Great Yogeshwara says,

> "...the city must purify itself if it is not to dissolve again....Of egoism, selfishness, stupidity...But purity can come only through sacrifice (p.263)

The novel advocates spiritual consciousness and negation of self for personal and national redemption. The question is not of individual success or failure but of collective efforts for the common good. Until that is achieved, corruption, poverty, violence and misery would continue and no system of governance would prove infallible. A similar note of achieving redemption through integrity and penance is struck in Joshi's novel *The Apprentice* (1974), which presents an India mired in corruption and purposelessness. Mahatma Gandhi believed that the salvation of the people depends upon their capacity for suffering and sacrifice. R.S.Pathak opines that the means suggested by Arun Joshi to counteract life's meaninglessness have been elaborately described in Indian philosophy and scriptures, but, the way he integrates them into his novels is really remarkable. His novels indicate that self-actualisation and salvation is possible only by liberating the self from the clutches of mercenary civilization and listening to the inner being (Pathak139-140).

Arun Joshi's splendid tale closes with an emphasis on sound moral foundations for nation-states. It affirms human surrender to the Divine as the ultimate solution to existential crises –

> "...we are only instruments...of the great God in the highest heaven who is the Master of the Universe. How perfect we are as instruments is all that matters. His is the will, His is the force." (p. 264)

As G.S.Amur writes, "*The City and The River* is a parable about human choice between allegiance to God and allegiance to Man or.....between

religion and politics..... as an affirmation of India's wisdom...and the value of the fable as a mode of comprehension it has a unique place in Indian fiction in English" (Amur152-157).

Towards Personal and National Salvation

To sum up, *The City and the River* is a tour de force not only because its cyclical structure points to the causes of the endless cycle of human misery, but also because it reveals a cosmic vision of truth and a panacea to the conflict in personal and national life. According to O.P.Mathur, Arun Joshi's last novel shows a greater maturity, a cosmic and affirmative vision, a passage from direct portrayal of men and society to symbolism, prophecy and experimentation with the theme of eternity (Mathur 91-101). *The City and the River* stands perhaps as the most significant and uniquely powerful political novel in Indian English fiction on account of its emphasis on spiritually ideal statecraft and salvation of the nation through self-sacrifice and self-purification against the backdrop of the eternal clash of good and evil.

6.4. A Vision for the Nation

Set against the backdrop of governmental tyranny, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* depict ultra-modern civilizations that favour progress over freedom. They emphasize that progress devoid of a moral and spiritual vision leads to destruction. Secondly, both novels underline the role and responsibility of the individual citizen and the community in influencing governments, and thus shaping the destiny of the nation. Finally, both the novelists strongly suggest the Platonic ideal of rule by virtue and wisdom and advocate the regeneration of humane ideals in both personal and national lives. And the prayer of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* becomes the prayer of the Indian citizen:

> "Lead me from the unreal to the Real,
> Lead me from darkness to Light,
> Lead me from death to Immortality."

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CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Into that heaven of freedom, Father, let my country awake...
—Rabindranath Tagore

7.1. The Personal and The National

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

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

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

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

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in the remote north-east against the backdrop of the bloody Gorkha insurgency. It mirrors the regional secessionisms of the 1960s-1980s which threatened the idea of an integrated India and traces them to developmental disparities and class-conflicts chiefly caused by administrative failures. The novel also deals

with the often painful process of emigration to the West in the 1980s in search of better prospects. On the one hand, Kiran Desai portrays the decadent colonial legacy that has left behind a soulless Anglicised class and has sown the seeds for territorial disputes. On the other hand, as a diasporic writer, she castigates the grand neo-colonial project of corporate globalization which forces Third World immigrants to earn their livelihood in the First World suffering deprivation, insult and crises of identity. She sensitively handles the tormented psyche and undying spirit of ordinary citizens caught between violent regional or ethnic conflicts and tortuous post-colonial dilemmas. Desai makes an admirable effort to canonize all those marginalized by the abuse of power, knowledge and wealth, cutting across temporal and spatial boundaries. By centering subaltern narratives and the conveniently glossed over ugly realities of the twenty-first century world, she seeks justice for the voiceless.

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

David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* narrates the journey of a young newspaper journalist in the momentous 1990s marked by economic revolution and communal strife. While depicting the tragedy of riots and

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

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

Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* uses the perspective of a street-child who has won a billion in a quiz-show and the cinematic format to visualize twenty-first century India. It reflects almost every national issue - slums and poverty, the world of glamour, corruption, breakdown of law and order, abuse of women and children. Real knowledge of life and practical wisdom become powerful weapons of the have-nots as they take on a

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

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

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* is a post-modern feminist dystopia depicting the tyrannical tendencies, plutocracy, inhuman use of technology and other evils of modern-day statecraft reaching their penultimate stage. The science-fiction novel set in an imaginary land which bears

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

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

7.2. Observations, Evaluations, Inferences

An overview of the major themes and issues dealt with in the selected novels offers vital insights into the mutual interaction between individual characters or private lives on the one hand, and, major national events or socio-political forces, mechanisms and philosophy of the Indian nation-state on the other. Some significant conclusions may also be drawn with regard to the functioning of Indian democracy and the roles of government

and citizen. This also helps to assess the selected novels as historical documents which not only help in understanding a complex nation but also exemplify the role of literature in national life.

Gauging Indian Democracy

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

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

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

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

Documenting the Government-Citizen Interface

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

A close reading of the selected novels reveals that the Indian nation-state was founded on resilient democratic institutions. However, over the years, manipulated by power-hungry politicians and unable to meet the just expectations of the masses in the face of rapid socio-economic change, public institutions have been losing their moral authority and ability to govern. Today, the Indian political system is trapped between omnipotent capitalist lobbies and impoverished masses struggling for inclusive development. At the core of this crisis of governance lies the absolute corruption and criminalization of political parties and electoral politics, which is seen in almost all the novels especially Swarup's *Six Suspects*, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins*. While the corruption in the bureaucracy leads to the nullification of even the best legislations, the overburdened, ill-equipped and underpaid police

machinery suffers from the tag of brutality, partiality and inefficiency. Each novel paints the bleak picture of a deeply politicized police and bureaucracy. Police atrocities figure in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Vikas Swarup's *Q&A*, Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* and Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins*. The soul-dead bureaucracy figures prominently in Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects*, Joshi's *The City and The River* and Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins*. Often, public institutions abdicate their own powers through inaction. The passivity of police or civilian administration and lack of accountability on the part of public servants is seen to be the chief cause of public misery in the accounts of the 1975 emergency by Gurcharan Das, Rohinton Mistry and Arun Joshi, in the reference to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots by Rohinton Mistry, in the depiction of the 1992-93 religious riots in Meher Pestonji's *Pervez-A Novel* and David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors*. Aravind Adiga, Vikas Swarup and Tarun Tejpal castigate the present-day behaviour of public servants at a lower level ranging from clerks and constables to staff in government schools and hospitals. The disdain for the rule of law shown by public servants and political actors has several causes ranging from increasing materialism to acceptance of corruption. Even civil society institutions and the media are affected by this malaise. The failures of the criminal justice system in swiftly prosecuting the truly guilty are castigated by Swarup in *Six Suspects* and Tejpal in *The Story Of My Assassins*.

The selected novels critique objectively the roles played by the citizen and the government in post-independence India, both with regard to what these roles are and what they ought to be. They laud the positive contributions of citizens and governments and condemn their failures. Each novel reiterates the idea of the individual patiently rebuilding what has been destroyed by politics and history, state and government – whether it is the Partition refugees in Gurcharan Das's *A Fine Family,* or citizens and groups who fight for religious harmony in Meher Pestonji's *Pervez* and David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors,* or the struggle of the underdog in Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* to overcome an elitist system. The role of the free press and of civil society in enforcing political accountability is debated by Meher Pestonji and David Davidar and by Vikas Swarup in *Six Suspects*, while Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* laments the subjugation of the press to vested interests. There are so many stories of the triumphs of individuals over corrupt systems and cruel destinies. The spirit of resilience runs as a common thread through all the novels, uniting the sagas of citizens nurturing liberty and peace, progress and fraternity despite the Partition of 1947, the class-wars and violent secessionism of

the 1960s-1980s, the Emergency of the 1970s, the religious riots of the 1990s and the double onslaught of imperialist globalisation and religion-based terrorism in the new millennium. Those unable to balance and rebuild, to depend on private initiative when government mechanisms falter, end in failure. As far as the government is concerned, the selected novels reveal its vast sweep over the fates of millions and its gradually increasing totalitarianism, populism and divorce from constitutional values. Even as the plutocratic government appears to abdicate its role in reconciling economic and political democracy, mediation of the citizenry becomes inevitable. Various movements for justice and liberty are an inspiring example of the democratic ethos.

Post-Colonial and Subaltern Perspectives

A critical reading of the selected novels suggests the continuing negative influence of colonial legacies on the state machinery. Even after the formal end of colonialism, colonial centres continue to dominate through ruling elites, foreign aid, World Bank models of development and multi-national corporations. These novels suggest disillusionment with the exclusionary, oppressive nature of the postcolonial nation-state. Theirs is an attempt to remember old scars, re-interpret canons and re-claim lost territory, to fight the continuing colonisation of the weak, the coercion and exploitation practised in the name of development, to rescue native cultures from the homogenising onslaught of globalization.

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

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

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

The national role of the suppressed womanhood is dealt with by almost all the novelists, especially the women writers. The overall impression is that despite suffering tremendously in a patriarchal society, women rise to the occasion and act as nurturers and as catalysts of positive change during

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

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

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

Meher Pestonji (*Pervez – A Novel*). The spectre of communalism casts its shadow in Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* and Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* which also has a poignant rendering of the partition.

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

The Role of Literature in National Life

The select novels draw attention to the role of literature in national life. Objectively narrating a nation like India which defies definition is an enormous challenge. The selected novelists reflect national changes and the myriad ways in which they shape the character and destiny of individuals. They portray how the individual is often hunted down by history and politics, but also rises to the occasion by fighting actively or passively against dark forces. They dismantle the grand paradigms of history by giving shape and identity to the eternally silenced heirs to suffering. They reiterate a belief in the ultimate triumph of the human spirit. At the same time, they also point to the failures of citizens, especially the decline of honesty, industry and altruism and their replacement by unabashed materialism. They trace national failures to changing value systems and advocate a return to integrity in personal and public lives. If Gurcharan Das and Tarun Tejpal attempt to explicate the philosophy of detached action, Rohinton Mistry emphasises on maintaining a fine balance between hope and despair and Arun Joshi

advocates selfless striving towards an ideal society and submission to Divine Providence. Again, the protagonists in all novels show a conscious preference for adhering to their moral convictions and refuse to submit to dark forces, though they pay a great price. Against the backdrop of increasing state controls, these novels espouse rule by wisdom and ideals. While they demonstrate that unethical progress is self-destructive, they also emphasize the responsibility of citizens in ensuring that governments work for human welfare.

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

Finally, each of the selected novelists is actively concerned with social, political and national issues. For instance, Gurcharan Das, a former entrepreneur has been writing much serious non-fiction dealing with varied national issues and takes a clear stance on the path to be followed by state and citizen for socio-economic growth. He has actively campaigned for economic and institutional reforms. Rohinton Mistry, though living in Canada has constantly followed and been engrossed with national events - past and present. Arundhati Roy has metamorphosed into a fiery social activist often subversive in her espousal of public movements of the marginalised against the government machinery. Kiran Desai, a diasporic writer, shows keen awareness of the plight of illegal, impoverished Indian immigrants. Meher Pestonji has been active in social work for women and children, in journalism and in fighting communal politics. David Davidar's years as a journalist have given him a close view of national realities. Vikas Swarup a top diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service shows a keen empathy for the deprived. Aravind Adiga's views

and lifestyle make his preference for the subaltern citizens of India clear. Tarun Tejpal is an investigative journalist who runs a news organization devoted to exposing corruption in high places. Manjula Padmanabhan's feminist and pro-Third World concerns are well-known while the late Arun Joshi devoted his art to resolving the mental and spiritual traumas of a nation in transition. All of these writers intend to employ their art to disturb the conscience of the nation. In fact, some of them like Gurcharan Das and Arundhati Roy have made a conscious move from fiction to non-fiction in order to address national issues more effectively.

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

7.3. In Prospect

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

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

The same global trend seems to be repeated in India. The government machinery is not very tolerant of genuine non-violent civil disobedience as seen in several instances ranging from the Narmada valley to Manipur to

Bhopal and Kashmir where citizens protest official acts of omission or commission, or in the response of the state machinery to the outrage over massive scams in the public sector, or even the mass protests against nuclear power plants in several regions. Agriculture, education and healthcare sectors languish dismally while caste and gender discrimination flourish. The ruling elites have stealthily promoted reforms facilitating accumulation of wealth by the new elite who are dismissive of mass-based electoral democracy. Conditions are still non-conducive for real democracy and except for electoral voting, the partnership of the masses is absent in decision-making. The backlashes from the dominant state often force the dispossessed into militancy. The Maoist insurgency is a reaction to the appalling oppression and exploitation of peasants, lower castes and tribals by state-backed elites. Nevertheless, Indian democracy still shows considerable depth and vitality and the weapon of the vote is cherished by the masses. There is a struggle between repressive state agencies controlled by corporates and the various movements on the part of the subaltern to carve out a just and pluralistic nation. Whether it is the struggle against felling trees in the forests of Garhwal and Kumaon, or against bauxite mining in the tribal belt of Gandhamardhan hills in Orissa, or that against commercial fishing trawlers off the coast of Kerala, whether it is the Narmada anti-big dam agitation or the recent long march in October 2012 by farmers from all over the country whose lands have been grabbed by vested interests - all these convey a message in favour of sustainable and decentralised development, underpinned by a belief in participatory democracy. The recent national outrage over the brutal gang-rape and murder of a young student in Delhi in December 2012 signifies not only the widespread violence against and oppression of women but also their valiant struggle for equal rights as citizens. The growing debate over measures such as the Lokpal Bill to check corruption, and, the various civil society organisations like Anna Hazare's *India Against Corruption* or Arvind Kejriwal's *Aam Aadmi Party*, demanding accountability from those in public office, are redeeming features, an attempt to reform the system from within rather than overthrowing it. A recent article in *The Hindu* lamented that as protestors storm bastions of power in the capital demanding laws to end political corruption and government tyranny, the nation is caught between an intolerant, insensitive political-government class and mobs baying for instant justice (Subrahmaniam, *The Hindu* 10).

Noted sociologist T.K.Oommen identifies the ten major areas of concern for the Indian nation-state as follows- 1) Unfinished political consolidation, 2) Cultural estrangement, 3) Social discrimination, 4)

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

In the final analysis, despite immense social churning and the threatening forces of divisiveness, India has succeeded gloriously in keeping alive her cosmopolitan unity and diversity. India's secular, democratic and federal multi-party system has been its greatest success story. There has been massive expansion in almost all sectors and with high growth rates India stands to play a major role in the world economy. On the other hand, the greatest danger to India’s unity is posed by economic disparities and by communal and culturally homogenizing forces. Also, the poorest millions have little ability to hold their rulers accountable. The noble legacy of the freedom struggle has seen India survive in spite of all the failures and dark prophesies. India is an ancient civilisation and a young nation-state. India has shown that it can contain several narratives, cultures and nations within itself. India’s success as a

nation depends on how deep the anti-imperialism, total commitment to secular democracy and the egalitarian, pro-poor orientation of the founding fathers, permeates into state and society. Nevertheless, history will always laud the Indian people for achieving so much and so well, while treading along such a difficult terrain. The story of the forging of the world's largest democracy, is rich, inspiring and has confronted the established theories of democracy and nationalism. India anticipated the European attempt to create a multilingual, multi-religious, multiethnic, political community. There are miles to go, but, keeping in mind its glorious past, India can proudly take a giant leap forward. The masses have awakened to their power and their experiments and failures will pave the way for a great future.

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

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

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APPENDIX

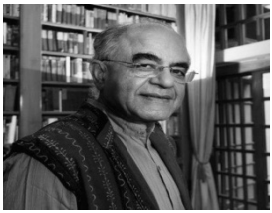
A. The Novelists

B. Preamble to the Constitution of India

C. Jawaharlal Nehru's Address to the Nation on the Eve of Independence

D. A Timeline of Major Events in the History of Independent India

The Novelists



Gurcharan Das

Rohinton Mistry

Arundhati Roy

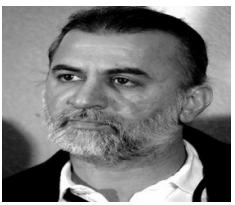
Kiran Desai

Meher Pestonji

David Davidar

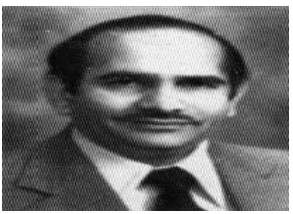
Aravind Adiga

Vikas Swarup

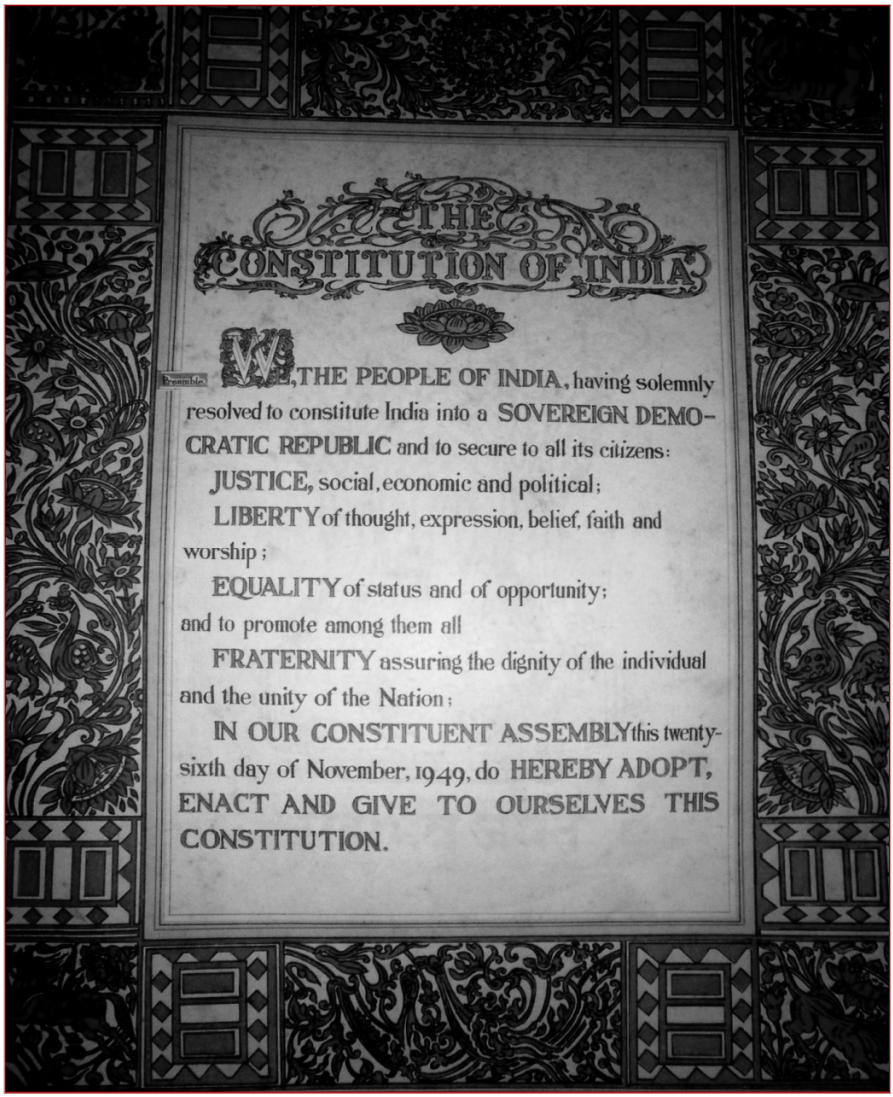


Tarun Tejpal

Manjula Padmanabhan



Arun Joshi



Preamble To The Constitution of India

A Tryst with Destiny

(Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's address to the nation on the eve of Independence -14th August 1947)

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially.At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.

It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity.At the dawn of history India started on her unending quest, and trackless centuries are filled with her striving and the grandeur of her success and her failures. Through good and ill fortune alike she has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength. We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again.The achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity, to the greater triumphs and achievements that await us. Are we brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future?

Freedom and power bring responsibility. The responsibility rests upon this assembly, a sovereign body representing the sovereign people of India. Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow. Some of those pains continue even now. Nevertheless, the past is over and it is the future that beckons to us now.That future is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we may fulfil the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity.

The ambition of the greatest man of our generation has been to wipe every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us, but as long as there are tears and suffering, so long our work will not be over.

And so we have to labour and to work, and work hard, to give reality to our dreams. Those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for anyone of them to imagine that it can live apart.

Peace has been said to be indivisible; so is freedom, so is prosperity now, and so also is disaster in this one world that can no longer be split into isolated fragments.

To the people of India, whose representatives we are, we make an appeal to join us with faith and confidence in this great adventure. This is no time for petty and destructive criticism, no time for ill will or blaming others. We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell.

Contd.

The appointed day has come - the day appointed by destiny - and India stands forth again, after long slumber and struggle, awake, vital, free and independent. The past clings on to us still in some measure and we have to do much before we redeem the pledges we have so often taken. Yet the turning point is past, and history begins anew for us, the history which we shall live and act and others will write about. It is a fateful moment for us in India, for all Asia and for the world. A new star rises, the star of freedom in the east, a new hope comes into being, a vision long cherished materialises. May the star never set and that hope never be betrayed!

We rejoice in that freedom, even though clouds surround us, and many of our people are sorrow-stricken and difficult problems encompass us. But freedom brings responsibilities and burdens and we have to face them in the spirit of a free and disciplined people. On this day our first thoughts go to the architect of this freedom, the father of our nation, who, embodying the old spirit of India, held aloft the torch of freedom and lighted up the darkness that surrounded us. We have often been unworthy followers of his and have strayed from his message, but not only we but succeeding generations will remember this message and bear the imprint in their hearts of this great son of India, magnificent in his faith and strength and courage and humility. We shall never allow that torch of freedom to be blown out, however high the wind or stormy the tempest.

Our next thoughts must be of the unknown volunteers and soldiers of freedom who, without praise or reward, have served India even unto death. We think also of our brothers and sisters who have been cut off from us by political boundaries and who unhappily cannot share at present in the freedom that has come. They are of us and will remain of us whatever may happen, and we shall be sharers in their good and ill fortune alike. The future beckons to us. Whither do we go and what shall be our endeavour? To bring freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman. We have hard work ahead. There is no resting for any one of us till we redeem our pledge in full, till we make all the people of India what destiny intended them to be.

We are citizens of a great country, on the verge of bold advance, and we have to live up to that high standard. All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations. We cannot encourage communalism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great whose people are narrow in thought or in action.

To the nations and peoples of the world we send greetings and pledge ourselves to cooperate with them in furthering peace, freedom and democracy.

And to India, our much-loved motherland, the ancient, the eternal and the ever-new, we pay our reverent homage and we bind ourselves afresh to her service.

Jai Hind.

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A TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF INDEPENDENT INDIA

1947 Indian Independence Bill is passed by the British Parliament; India is divided and Pakistan is created; Over a million are slaughtered in the communal riots that follow the Partition of India; India is declared independent of British rule with New Delhi as capital and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is sworn in as the first Prime Minister of Independent India; Invasion of Kashmir by Pakistan.

1948 Gandhiji is assassinated. India wins London Olympics hockey gold.

1949 India and Pakistan agree truce in war over Kashmir; Constitution of India adopted by the Constituent Assembly.

1950 India becomes a Sovereign Democratic Republic as Constitution of India comes into force with universal adult franchise; Dr.Rajendra Prasad becomes the first President of India.

1951 First Asian Games in New Delhi; First Five Year Plan (1951-56) announced.

1952 India's first International Film Festival in Bombay; The first National General Elections in India; Dr. Rajendra Prasad elected President; India wins Helsinki Olympics hockey gold.

1954 World's longest canal Bhakra Nangal opened in Punjab; Sahitya Akademi, the Indian Academy of Letters established.

1955 Panch Sheel agreement (outlining Nehru's foreign policy of mutual respect for territorial integrity, benefit and co-existence) between China and India; India's Untouchability (Offence) Act comes into force.

1956 Asia's first atomic reactor Apsara goes critical in Trombay; Indian States reorganized on linguistic basis; India wins Melbourne Olympics hockey gold.

1957 Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) opens in Trombay; Second General Elections.

1958 Nationwide Panchayati Raj launched; Supreme Court of India built.

1960 Bombay bifurcated into Maharashtra and Gujarat States; Union of Kashmir with India.

1961 India's first aircraft carrier INS Vikrant commissioned; India occupies the Portuguese enclaves of Goa, Daman and Diu.

1962 Third General Elections; Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan elected President of India; War between India and China.

1964 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, architect of modern India, dies; Lal Bahadur Shastri becomes India's second Prime Minister; India wins Tokyo Olympics hockey gold; India's first indigenous computer ISIJU, developed by Indian Statistical Institute and Jadavpur University, Calcutta.

1965 Indo-Pak war in the Rann of Kutchh; First Indian team led by MS Kohli ascends Mount Everest.

1966 Tashkent Agreement to restore peace and normalcy between India and Pakistan reached; Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri dies in Tashkent, USSR; Indira Gandhi elected leader of the Congress Party to succeed Lal Bahadur Shastri; The states of Punjab and Haryana created.

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1967 Fourth General Elections; Indira Gandhi elected Prime Minister; Dr. Zakir Hussain elected President.

1968 Dr. Hargobind Khurana shares Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology; Dara Singh becomes world wrestling champion.

1969 Dr. Zakir Hussain dies; V.V Giri elected President; Congress splits-Indira Gandhi forms her own Congress.

1971 Fifth General Elections; Indira Gandhi elected Prime Minister; Indira Gandhi expresses full support to the Bangladeshi struggle for freedom; Bangladesh war ends
when Pakistani army surrenders to the Indian army.

1972 Shimla Agreement signed between India and Pakistan .

1974 India's first atomic device code-named 'Smiling Buddha', exploded at Pokhran in Rajasthan; Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed elected President; Jayprakash Narayan leads movement for "Total Revolution".

1975 Bombay-High oil located; Indian satellite Aryabhatta launched; Prime Minister Indira Gandhi found guilty by Court of electoral malpractice; State of National Emergency declared, including arrests of Opposition leaders, press censorship, and Sanjay Gandhi's 'Five Point Programme'.
1976 Doordarshan established.

1977 Sixth General Elections; Emergency officially withdrawn; Janata party wins majority in Parliament; Indira Gandhi resigns; Morarji Desai, a non-Congress leader becomes Prime Minister; Neelam Sanjiva Reddy elected President of India.

1979 Mother Teresa wins Nobel Peace Prize.

1980 Seventh General Elections; Indira Gandhi elected again as Prime Minister; India wins Moscow Olympics hockey gold.

1982 Gyani Zail Singh elected President of India.

1983 Seventh Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in New Delhi; Prof. Subramanyam Chandrashekhar shares Nobel Prize for Physics.

1984 Rakesh Sharma becomes first Indian in space; Bachendri Pal becomes first Indian woman to conquer Everest; Military Operation Blue Star ordered by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to remove six separatists from the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab; Indira Gandhi assassinated by her bodyguards; Eighth General Elections; Rajiv Gandhi elected Prime Minister; In Bhopal, 2500 persons die in Union Carbide gas leak tragedy.

1985 Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) established.

1987 Dr. R. Venkataraman elected President of India; Sunil Gavaskar becomes first batsman to make 10,000 runs; Vishwanathan Anand becomes India's first and world's youngest chess grand-master.

1988 Prithvi, the first tactical surface-to-surface short range ballistic missile test-fired; India's first remote sensing satellite IRS-IA launched; Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi controversy erupts over disputed mosque at Ayodhya.

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1989 Indian National Flag hoisted at South Pole; Agni, the first surface-to-surface intermediate range ballistic missile test fired; Trishul, the first surface- to-air short-range missile test-fired; Foundation stone laid for the Ram Janmabhoomi temple at Ayodhya; Bofors controversy over corruption in defence purchases; Ninth General Elections; V.P Singh elected Prime Minister.

1990 Government accepts Mandal Commission recommendations for reservation in jobs for backward castes leading to violent student agitations; Akash, the first surface-to-air medium range missile test fired; Bharatiya Janata Party's L.K. Advani starts his Rath Yatra campaign for Ram Temple in Ayodhya leading to Hindu-Muslim riots; V.P. Singh tenders resignation and Chandrasekhar sworn in as Prime Minister.

1991 Chandrasekhar resigns as Prime Minister; Former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi killed by a LTTE suicide bomber in Sriperumbudur; Tenth General Elections; Dr.P.V. Narasimha Rao elected Prime Minister; Economic Reforms and Liberalisation launched to resolve debt crisis; India's first indigenous supercomputer built by CDAC Lab in Pune;

1992 Satyajit Ray awarded Oscar for lifetime achievement. Satellite INSAT 2A shot into space; Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma sworn in as ninth President of India; Babri Masjid at Ayodhya demolished by fanatics leading to serious Hindu-Muslim riots all over India.

1993 Hindu-Muslim tensions continue; Serial bomb-blasts rock Bombay; Earthquake kills thousands in Latur, Maharashtra.

1996 Eleventh General Elections; Atal Behari Vajpayee is Prime Minister until May 28; H.D Deve Gowda sworn in as Prime Minister on June 1.

1997 50th Anniversary of Indian Independence; I.K Gujral sworn in as Prime Minister; Dr.K.R.Narayanan elected President of India; I.K Gujral resigns as Prime Minister.

1998 Sonia Gandhi takes over as Congress party president; Twelfth General Elections; Atal Behari Vajpayee sworn in Prime Minister; India conducts Pokhran-II nuclear tests; Amartya Sen wins Nobel Prize for Economics; Arundhati Roy wins Booker Prize.

1999 Prime Minister Vajpayee arrives in Pakistan by Delhi-Lahore bus; Lahore Declaration signed to provide a peaceful and bilateral solution to the Kashmir issue; Intense fighting in Kargil due to infiltration of Pak-soldiers inside Line of Control; India declares its territory completely free of Pakistani intruders; Armed militants hijack an Indian Airlines aircraft with 189 people on board; Thirteenth General Elections; BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government formed and Atal Behari Vajpayee elected Prime Minister

2000 US President Bill Clinton visits India; Chhattisgarh, Uttaranchal and Jharkhand states are created; Karnam Malleswari wins weightlifting bronze at Sydney Olympics.

2001 Massive Earthquake in Gujarat causes over 40,000 casualties; The Agra summit between Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee; 14th Census of India begins; India clocks 1,027,015,247 people to become the world's second most populous nation after China; GSAT-1 satellite launched by GSLV-D1 from Sriharikota; PSLV-3 launched successfully; Terrorist attack on Indian Parliament.

2002 Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat leave over a thousand dead; Cabinet allows every citizen to hoist the national flag anytime; Satellite INSAT-3C put in geosynchronous orbit; Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) passed; Sachin Tendulkar equals Don Bradman's record of 29 centuries in test cricket; Dr.A.P.J Abdul Kalam elected President of India.

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2003 India announces many peace initiatives with Pakistan; 'BrahMos' super-sonic anti-ship cruise missile test-fired; Indian Light Combat Aircraft 'Tejas' makes maiden flight.

2004 Fourteenth General Elections; Congress returns to power forming United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government and Manmohan Singh appointed Prime Minister; Major RS Rathore wins Athens Olympics silver medal for shooting ; EDUSAT (education satellite) launched; A Tsunami in the Indian Ocean kills over 15,000 people in India alone.

2005 Tennis-player Sania Mirza becomes the first Indian woman to win a WTA event; The Right to Information Act comes into effect except in Jammu and Kashmir; Chinese premier Wen Jiabao visits India.

2006 U.S President George W.Bush visits India and signs landmark nuclear deal; President of China Hu Jintao visits India; Bomb blasts by terrorists on commuter trains across Bombay; Prevention of Child Marriage Bill-2004 passed in Rajya Sabha.

2007 India celebrates sixty years of independence; Pratibha Patil becomes first woman President of India; 14th SAARC Summit at New Delhi; Agni-III successfully test fired; 'Saras' prototype of India's first commercial civilian aircraft makes its maiden flight.

2008 Union Budget proposes Rs. 60,000 crore debt waiver for farmers; Bangalore and Ahmedabad cities rocked by serial bomb blasts; Beijing Olympics - Abhinav Bindra wins shooting gold, Sushil Kumar wins wrestling bronze and Vijender Singh wins boxing bronze; Swami Lakshmananda shot dead by Maoist extremists sparking widespread communal violence against Christian institutions and communities in Orissa; India enters the nuclear club as NSG lifts a 34-year old trade embargo; Chandrayaan-1,India's first moon mission launched successfully; Pakistani terrorists strike Mumbai laying siege at different locations, Operation Cyclone - the war on terror in Mumbai ends after 60 hours of battle, leaving 183 people dead; Parliament approves setting up of National Investigation Agency; New Anti-Terror law comes into effect.

2009 Sachin Tendulkar becomes first cricketer to complete 30,000 runs in world cricket; The film Slumdog Millionaire wins eight Oscars; Justice Liberhan Commission submits its report on the Babri Masjid demolition of 1992; The Report of The National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) recommending welfare measures for backward sections among religious and linguistic minorities, tabled in the Lok Sabha; Violent agitation for separate state of Telangana.

2010 Agni-III missile launched; Terror attacks in Pune; The Rajya Sabha passes the Women's Reservation Bill, providing one-third reservation of seats in Parliament and State Assemblies for women; Saina Nehwal attains No.5 ranking in World Badminton; The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act comes into force; A trial court in Bhopal convicts all seven accused in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984; Massive Maoist insurgency and encounters between Maoists and security forces; Parliament passes Civil Liability for Nuclear Damages Bill; Unique Identification Authority of India initiates project to provide all Indian residents with a Unique Identification number; Allahabad High Court ruling for settlement on 60-year old Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute; U.S President Barack Obama visits India. Nineteenth Commonwealth Games held in Delhi, India wins large haul of medals across varied events.

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2011 Former Telecom Minister A.Raja sent to Tihar Jail in 2G spectrum scam; India wins the 2011 Cricket World Cup; Anna Hazare undertakes fast for anti-corruption Jan Lokpal Bill at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi; famous painter M.F.Hussain passes away; 26 killed in a series of bomb-blasts in Mumbai; Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) agreement signed; F1 2011 Race comes to India at the Buddh International Circuit, Noida; Lok Sabha passes Lokpal Bill.

2012 Advanced Interceptor missile successfully test-fired; Parliament celebrates 60th anniversary; Violence in Assam; London Olympics - India's most successful Olympics in terms of total medal tally, having won a total of 6 medals (2 silver and 4 bronze) Medal winners- Vijay Kumar, Sushil Kumar, Gagan Narang, Saina Nehwal, Mary Kom,Yogeshwar Dutt; founder and chief of the Shiv Sena - Bal Thackeray dies; Terrorist Ajmal Kasab hanged for 2008 Mumbai attacks; Sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar passes away; A female physiotherapy student beaten and gang raped in Delhi and later dies, amidst public outrage all over India.

2013 – South Asian Games; Aam Aadmi Party headed by Arvind Kejriwal wins landslide victory in Delhi elections assuming power; Flood and landslides in Uttarakhand; Serial blasts in Patna; 100th Indian Science Congress; Sachin Tendulkar retires from cricket; Cyclone Phailin in Odisha; India launches Mars Orbiter Mission.

2014 – Narendra Modi becomes Prime Minister of India after massive victory by BJP; Formation of new state of Telangana; Mars Orbiter Mission of India successfully enters Mars orbit; Cyclone Hudhud hits Vizag, Andhra Pradesh.

2015 – NITI Aayog replaces Planning Commission of India; U.S.President Barack Obama chief guest at Republic Day celebrations; Widespread heat wave and swine flu deaths; Bharat Ratna awarded to Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Madan Mohan Malviya; Launch of several national security schemes; International Yoga Day and National Unity Day instituted; North India affected by massive Nepal earthquake; Drought in Maharashtra; Death of former president and nuclear scientist Dr. APJ Kalam.