

Clouded future: Infringement of human rights in a fine balance and Chhattisgarh sterilisation tragedy

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Abstract

Human rights are commonly understood as fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being, the effective realization of which can be achieved only through an efficient democracy. Though sixty years have passed after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is still more of a dream than reality as violations exist in every part of the world.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, set during the Emergency of 1975, perfectly captures the emotions of Dalits and the marginalized whose rights were denied and their freedom snatched away. Mistry conveys with thunderous impact the fragile line between living and existing in a country besieged with political squalor and sociologic catastrophe of the extant caste system. This paper examines whether the Indian democracy was capable of providing the basic human rights in the post Independent India by analyzing Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and the recent *Chhattisgarh Sterilisation Tragedy*, November 2014.

Keywords: Human rights, Emergency, Sterilization, marginalized, disempowered

Introduction

Human rights are commonly understood as fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because he or she is a human being, regardless of nation, location, language, religion, ethnic origin or any other status. Though sixty years have passed after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is still more of a dream than reality as violations exist in every part of the world.

The effective realization of human rights can be achieved only through an efficient democracy. Indian democracy, the largest of its kind, necessitates this freedom and equality of all human beings and more specifically justice and basic amenities to the underprivileged and deprived. This paper examines whether the Indian democracy was capable of providing these rights in the post Independent India by analyzing the recent *Chhattisgarh Sterilisation Tragedy*, 8th November 2014 and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

Many Indian English writers from R. K. Narayan to Amitav Ghosh have attempted to voice the Dalits and the marginalized, the atrocities faced in their precariousness of existence but the writings of Rohinton Mistry, a twice displaced, Indian migrant in Canada, becomes prominent. As E. M. Foster commented, Mistry possessed the right amount of insight and detachment needed in voicing the marginalized. Living in Bombay for the first 23 years of his life as a Parsi minority he had experienced the pains and pangs of being marginalized and after migrating to Canada he was categorized as the other. It is this double displacement which makes his novels poignant and successful.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a novel of epic proportions - in length, subject and creativity. While the story is uniquely Indian, it is also universally human. Set during the Emergency of 1975, the book perfectly captures the emotions of the untouchables and Dalits whose rights were denied and their freedom snatched away. Though Mistry left India just before Emergency, he was well updated on the events and happenings related to it that he made full use of it in this

novel. Mistry conveys with thunderous impact the incredible poverty and fragile line between living and existing in a country besieged with political squalor and sociologic catastrophe of the extant caste system.

The experience of Dukhi Mochi along with his sons allows Mistry to deal with those who are disempowered. Om and Ishvar, the twice disempowered rural inhabitants have only a subhuman and debased existence, undergoes humiliation and loses self-respect as they become victims of class hierarchies and caste oppression. Dukhi remarks that as untouchables in the village community, the members of the Chamaar caste are subjected to great ignominy.

Dukhi becomes more and more aware of this notion of untouchability ravaging them for centuries, denying dignity to exist as human beings. Ishvar and Narayan, the untouchable children are punished and beaten savagely by the teacher for entering the temple of learning and polluting the reading materials. The teacher yells: "You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school! He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry... Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge? (*A Fine Balance* 110). The boys were stripped in front of the whole school and mercilessly beaten so that they would never attempt it again. "That should teach you...Now get out, and don't let your unclean faces be seen here ever again" (*AFB* 111) yelled the teacher.

Dukhi, hurt and utterly helpless at the sight of his sons decides to start a single rebellion against this caste system by changing the profession of his children from tanning to tailoring, hoping to create changes in their hierarchical position in the society. But in no time Dukhi's entire family is burnt alive for distorting the society's timeless balance. Narayan, Ishvar's brother is flogged and hung naked by his ankles upside down, in the village square for attempting to cast his vote in the Parliamentary elections. As Ishvar and Om rush to the police station to file an F.I.R. after the cruel massacre of their family they are threatened and silenced by the Inspector: "What kind

of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filthy achool castes are always out to make troubles! Get out before we charge you with public mischief" (AFB 149). Altogether it was a time of exploitations and violence, destruction and bloodshed. As Ibrahim reveals the people have nothing but sorrow when the world is controlled by wicked people: "these Emergency times are terrible, sister. Money can buy the necessary police order. Justice is sold to the highest bidder" (AFB 432).

In search of a better fortune the tanner turned tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, leave to the town and then to the city to make a decent living. Here they meet the other two protagonists of the novel, Dina Dalal, a Parsi woman who runs a tailoring business to retain her independence following the untimely death of her beloved husband and her boarder, Maneck Kolah, a student from a small hillside town. "Mistry's fictional rendering makes us believe that life consists of such events, even as he highlights the distinct possibilities of the extraordinary happenings in life as brilliantly expounded in the coming together of four protagonists of the novel" (K C Belliappa 208). Mistry's focus remains on the very personal lives of his four main characters whose lives are joined together in the most happenstance of circumstances. They slowly get to know each other and learn about the horrors, pains, delights and as they share deeper kinship they find their lives begin to stabilize.

In no time a number of incredible misfortunes cut out that stability threatening their right to life and thought. Rohinton Mistry is authentic in his portrayal of India during the time of emergency, the bleak realities and horrifying implications of the anarchy and exploitation in the name of discipline, beautification and progress in a democratic country. *A Fine Balance* set in Indira Gandhi's India and more especially during the time of emergency is a stark and moving portrait of life in India during this period. "It reflects the reality of India, the predatory politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and bloodshed. The novel also gives an insight into rural India focusing on injustice, the cruelty, and the horrors of deprivation and portrays the trauma of India along communal, religious and linguistic lines" (Dodiya 22).

The first discussion of the emergency starts off with Ishvar and Dina: "Dinabai, what is this?" "Government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" (AFB 8). This creates a plain understanding of how the lower classes, the Dalits were alienated from the working of the democracy and did not really associate themselves with the various instruments that the government used. The poor rather wanted to stay away from it and hoped or maybe believed that they would remain unharmed. "Sounds like one more Government tamasha... No consideration for people like us" (AFB 5) thought the chamaars, whose discourses are partially and superficially covered in historical texts.

Om and Ishvar become utterly helpless and unaided as their shelters are bulldozed, and are evicted from their scanty existence in the name of city beautification. They lament on the disappearance of their houses and emerging laws:

But how can they destroy our homes, just like that? They said it's a new Emergency law... New law says the city must be made beautiful... The "Heartless animals! For the poor there is no justice, ever! We had

next to nothing, now it's nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go?" (AFB 295).

With Emergency everything was made possible, innocent people could be jailed, the poor could be sterilized without their consent, the masses could be evicted from their dwellings without warning, protests could be suppressed and police could be bribed, no justice prevailed and any treachery was possible:

With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There's even a new law called MISA-Maintenance of Internal Security Act... Allows detention without trial, up to two years. Extensions also available on request, they can do anything they want. Police said it's a new law... Government makes laws without thinking" (AFB 299-304).

The tailors' next ordeal is the experience of being lifted from the streets and forcefully brought to the quarry where they are forced into relentless back breaking labor and treated little better than slaves. The construction site is an indigenous version of a concentration camp where grotesque accidents become a part of their everyday existence. Recollecting the dejection and misery at the camp, Ishvar's voice faded and Om stammered and started to cry. "It was terrible, the way they treated us, he sobbed, clawing at his hair. I thought my uncle and I were going to die there" (AFB 381).

During Emergency, "the right to trial was effectively suspended; public meetings were banned; newspapers were subject to strict controls; and even the writings on freedom of Indira's father, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mahatma Gandhi were censored" (Tariq Ali 185). This was a double blow for the poor and the Dalits. However, the most sinister elements of the Emergency, the violence against the body takes its most drastic form in the enforced sterilisations initiated by Indira's son and heir apparent, Sanjay.

After being rescued from the camp by Beggar Master, the leader of a band of beggars, Ishvar and Om are forcibly picked up from the town square, dragged off to one of the notorious family planning clinics in the countryside to fulfill the daily quota of sterilizations. The political clout of the village Zamindaar, Thakur Dharamsi is quite evident here when he directs the doctor to operate upon Om too, who is a mere youth, waiting to get married. They return to the city, Omprakash clearly unable to marry and Ishvar unable to work as both his legs have been amputated because of the gangrene that sets in as the operations are done in less than sanitary conditions. These Dalits are forever victims of oppression, either in the form of caste or class. Their presence within the structure of the novel represents the common man in the context of both urban and rural India. As Nandini Bhautoo observes:

Their trajectory allows them to encounter the dispossessed of both rural and urban areas... They are at the receiving end of insane plans of the government ...their suffering from village to town and then city allows Mistry to speak of powerlessness and oppression, in both city and country as a continuum (Rohinton Mistry 55).

Eventually they turn up as beggars in the big city. As Valmik philosophises on life: "After all, our lives are but a sequence of accidents - a clanking chain of chance events. A string of choices, casual or deliberate, which add up to that big one calamity we call life" (*AFB* 564). As Om and Ishvar are disabled, Dina Dalal, loses her struggle and is forced to leave her apartment and live at her brother's place, forfeiting her independence.

Reading through the numerous struggles of the socio-economically challenged characters during the Emergency, and how it dealt a blow to their already limited capacities and options of having a better future, the readers of the present generation might speculate whether such things did really happen or is it possible for such things to occur in a democratic country, legally responsible to protect the rights of its citizens, allowing them to exist as decent Human beings.

Analyzing the Sterilisation tragedy that took away the lives of eleven women after undergoing "faulty" Sterilisation surgeries at a government-organized family planning camp in Bilaspur district of Chhattisgarh, we get a firsthand awareness of how human life can be haphazardly handled with utmost negligence even in the present India. Eighty three women underwent the procedure in five hours at the free Sterilisation camp, organized by the Bilaspur district health department on November 8, 2014, at the Nemichand Jain hospital.

The operations in Chhattisgarh, one of India's poorest states, were carried out by a single doctor and his assistant in about five hours. The women had all undergone surgical procedures at a hospital that local officials said was not equipped to accommodate such a large number of patients. The economically backward women from the lowest strata of society were literally bribed into these camps. As part of the efforts to ensure maximum participation, each woman undergoing operation was to get Rs 1400 and the health worker bringing them to the camp was to get Rs 200 per case. Many were reported to have been suffering from anaemia, severe asthma and diabetes. None appeared to have been properly examined before the operation. Being from poverty-stricken rural communities, many would have been in poor physical condition, "They [health workers] said nothing would happen, it was a minor operation. They herded them like cattle," (*The Hindu* Nov. 13) says Mahesh Suryavanshi, the brother-in-law of one casualty. Such camps are held regularly across India as part of a long-running effort to control population growth.

After visiting the victims at the hospital, State Congress president Bhupesh Baghel told the reporters in Bilaspur that "Medicines past their expiry date were given to the patients and the surgeries were conducted in an extremely unhygienic place which led to the deaths. This is criminal negligence on the part of the government," (*The Hindu* Nov. 12). Meanwhile Dr. Gupta. Accused the government and his superiors of making him a "scapegoat", and claimed that he was being wrongly implicated for the "wrong policies" of the government. The incidents in *A Fine Balance* and the *Chhattisgarh Sterilisation Tragedy* clearly focuses on the negligence of the concerned Governments, even after six decades of Independence. Governments may come and Governments may go, but violations of human rights would go on in this country, unless and until serious academic discourses of human rights are generated and stringent measures taken against those who violate it. We need to

evolve a consensus that India does not require unplanned economic growth, sacrificing the poor and the Dalits at the altar of "common good". What it needs is to bring equality, justice and the basic amenities to its underprivileged and deprived. "In the end, it's all a question of balance" (*AFB* 231).

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