

Human Dignity in Time of State Oppression: Reading the Emergency in Rohinton's Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry shows a realistic picture of the Emergency. The Emergency period is one of the most controversial and dark times in India's history since independence. The state of Emergency was declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It lasted for 21 months, from 1975 to 1977. The government said it was declared because of 'internal disturbances' in the country. The Emergency gave the Prime Minister complete power. Elections were suspended. People's civil rights and freedoms were taken away. The press was censored. Many human rights were violated. One example was a forced sterilization campaign. A new law called MISA allowed anyone to be jailed without a trial. There were many deaths in police custody. Many writers of that time felt they had to respond. They used their writing to express their frustration and sorrow. In any political upheaval like this, the rich, elite sections of society do not suffer much. The poorer sections suffer the most from its harmful effects. They are the victims of an unjust social order. Mistry reveals its horror and its impact. The characters—Om, Ishvar, Dina, and Maneck—are all victims of this era. Some are directly harmed, while others suffer indirectly. It is important to remember that the political changes during the Emergency created havoc in India's social and cultural fabric. In any political upheaval like this, the rich, elite sections of society do not suffer much. The poorer sections suffer the most from its harmful effects. They are the victims of an unjust social order. This order is heavily tilted in favour of the rich. Lower class and caste people always find themselves at the receiving end of such political turmoil.

Keywords: *Emergency, Horror, Social Order, Caste, State Oppression, Human Dignity, Victims*

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* published in 1995, occupies a central position in contemporary Indian English fiction for its portrayal of political authoritarianism and social injustice. The novel is set in 1970s India. The Emergency of 1975–1977 marked a decisive rupture in India's democratic self-image. Declared under Article 352 of the Constitution on the grounds of "internal disturbance," the Emergency enabled the central government to rule by decree, censor the press, imprison political opponents, and suspend fundamental rights. Scholars have described this period as a moment when constitutional legality was mobilized to legitimize authoritarian control (Austin 98).

Mistry transforms this historical moment into a narrative canvas that captures the lived experiences of ordinary citizens whose lives are reshaped by forces far beyond their control. During this time, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of Emergency wherein constitutional rights were suspended, political dissent was criminalized, and the state machinery was mobilized to enforce discipline and conformity. This was a period of very strict government control. It affected common people deeply. Many writers of that time felt they had to respond. They used their writing to express their frustration and sorrow. "The suspension of civil rights" (Mistry 428) exposes the marginalized to absolute predation. The law, instead of protecting them, becomes the instrument of their destruction. The novelist shows the Emergency through the stories of four people. He focuses on how their lives are changed, not just the politics. The characters are Ishvar Darji and

Omprakash Darji, who are tailors. Another is Dina Dalal, a widow trying to be independent. The last is Maneck Kohlah, a student who rents a room from her. At first, these four are managing their lives. But the events of the Emergency hit them hard. Their world falls apart. This leads to a central question in the novel: Can India find hope after such a difficult time? Or is there only sadness ahead? The novel's title gives the answer. Mistry carefully balances moments of hope with moments of despair.

The Emergency period is one of the most controversial and dark times in India's history since independence. The state of Emergency was declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It lasted for 21 months, from 1975 to 1977. The government said it was declared because of "internal disturbances" in the country. The Emergency gave the Prime Minister complete power. Elections were suspended. People's civil rights and freedoms were taken away. The press was censored. Many human rights were violated. One example was a forced sterilization campaign. A new law called MISA allowed anyone to be jailed without a trial. There were many deaths in police custody. It was a time of horror. Ramachandra Guha states, "The Emergency changed daily life for everyone. It affected common people deeply. Many writers of that time felt they had to respond, using their writing to express their frustration and sorrow" (512).

In Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, the Emergency is like a fire. It tests human dignity severely. Mistry shows that under state terror, dignity is not safe. It becomes a quiet act of resistance. This resistance is found in small, personal moments. It is found in acts of choice, kindness, and mutual care. Such generosity happens even while people's bodies and places in society are being destroyed. The state works tirelessly to remove this dignity. Bulldozers destroy homes. Sterilization camps attack people's bodies. Labour camps treat people as useless objects. What happens to Ishvar and Om is not poor luck. It is the direct result of government plans. They end up as beggars—one without legs, one without sight. This scene shows the state's victory. It has taken away their identity as tailors and citizens. But Mistry also shows dignity in surviving. It grows in the hidden spaces of a hard life. It appears in Dina's apartment. The characters share food, stories, and help. This private world is a temporary safe place. Despite widespread oppression, *A Fine Balance* holds out against cynicism. Human dignity endures through modest yet significant gestures such as the sharing of food, acts of companionship, and the preservation of self-respect amid humiliating circumstances. These moments reflect a relational understanding of dignity, one rooted in mutual recognition rather than institutional validation (Taylor 4). On the other side is the characters' struggle to hold onto meaning. The novel suggests our spirit can hold onto pieces of dignity. But state violence can cause such deep damage. What remains is a painful survival. It is a sad reminder of all that was destroyed.

During the Emergency, the state tries to crush hope. But the characters discover small ways to resist. Dina fights to keep her independence. Ishvar and Om struggle to earn an honest living. They want to work with dignity. Maneck searches for meaning and purpose. Their small acts of kindness matter. Sharing a meal is important. Their fragile hopes are like quiet acts of protest. These small actions defy a system. The system sees people only as numbers, not as human beings. Mistry argues that in terrible times, dignity is not about big victories. True dignity is found in a daily choice. In the novel the Emergency has created problem for common people. As it can be noted, "These Emergency times are terrible, sister. Money can buy the necessary police order. Justice is sold to the highest bidder." (Mistry 118). **Nilufer E. Bharucha**, argues, "Mistry uses a grotesque realism to portray state violence. The physical and psychological mutilation of characters like Ishvar and Om represents the state's attempt to erase their dignity, yet their mere survival becomes a silent, subversive act of resistance against this obliteration" (64).

A Fine Balance opens by showing the life of Dina. She is the main character, living in her small apartment in Bombay. She is portrayed as a humane person. She tries her best to help common people like the tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash. She gives them a sewing job. Dina is a widow living alone. She has a dominating brother named Nuswaan. He tries to control every part of her life. After their father, Dr. Shroff, died, Nuswaan became the head of the family. Dina fights against his control. She tries her best to maintain her dignity and independence. As mentioned, the novel also follows three other characters. They are Ishvar Darji, Omprakash, and Maneck. They all meet at Dina's place. All these characters feel a sense of rootlessness. Dina lives in Bombay. Ishvar and Omprakash are from rural India. Maneck is from the high Himalayas.

Mrs. Gupta is the manager of Au Revoir Exports. Mrs. Gupta approves of Indira Gandhi's Emergency actions. She believes in discipline and order. She is rich and her money keeps her safe. She does not face the harsh truth. She thinks the government's actions are necessary. Meanwhile, poor people like the tailors face terrible suffering. They experience arbitrary arrests, forced sterilizations, and demolished homes. Mrs. Gupta's support is not just a political opinion. It is an active form of complicity. Her view highlights a deep societal split. For the wealthy elite, the Emergency meant control and stability. For the poor, it meant raw oppression. This shows a central irony. The Emergency was declared in the 'national interest.' But in practice, it enforced one class's idea of order. It did this by violating another class's basic rights to survival and dignity. But Dina has the opposite view. She feels the Emergency is irrelevant for common Indians. She believes common people will suffer more because of it. In this situation, all four main characters suffer. Dina and Maneck are both Parsis, like Mistry himself. They suffer from the lawlessness and unpredictability of society. Ishvar and Omprakash are shown as victims of caste prejudices as well. Omprakash and Ishvar are from the *chamar* caste. Mistry provides details of how they live. They skin dead animals, eat the meat, and tan the hides. **Om's grandfather, Dukhi, is told by the Brahmin priest: "A crow cannot become a swan. A tanner's son must tan. That is the law of karma, the dharma of your caste"** (Mistry 362). By law, all are equal. But in practice, untouchables live a life of shame. They have no real rights. Their women are raped. Their huts are burned. They are brutally beaten. They have nowhere to go, no one to complain to, and no one to give them justice.

When Ishvar and Omprakash come to Bombay, they are forced to live in slums, or *jhopadpattis*. They have to do odd jobs as laborers. But soon they join tailoring business of Dina. There, they meet Maneck. A friendship blooms between Maneck and Omprakash. The stories of suffering from Ishvar and Omprakash give Maneck a deeper understanding of life. Dina gives them the job of tailoring dresses for the Au Revoir Export Company. Omprakash, wanting to do better financially, spies on Dina. He wants to see if they can supply directly to the company. The circumstances prevent them from succeeding. They remain tailors working for Dina.

All four main characters suffer from a deep sense of rootlessness. Ishvar and Omprakash are oppressed by caste. Maneck is isolated, having left his traditional home in the hills. Dina lives a life of loneliness after her husband's death. She fights for independence from her dominating brother, Nuswaan. All four characters are lonely and isolated in their own ways. Social and cultural circumstances cause this. Mistry makes them suffer many injustices. Yet, he makes them endure. This shows a political theme: humans find ways to survive adversity and oppression. In other words, all four characters try to maintain a fine balance in their lives despite the odds.

The Emergency changed daily life for everyone. In any political upheaval, the rich, elite sections of society do not suffer much. The poorer sections suffer the most from its harmful effects. They are the victims of an unjust social order. This order is heavily tilted in favour of the rich. Lower class and caste people always find themselves at the receiving end of such political turmoil. Mistry writes, "*For the poor, it's not a choice... It's a transistor radio, or a monetary incentive, or a promise of not being harassed*" (441). The two tailors are

forced to join a crowd of twenty-five thousand in a Bombay slum. They gather around a huge, eight-foot cut-out of the Prime Minister to pass the time. Mistry writes about the propaganda: “lots of lies have been spread about the emergency which had been declared specially for the people’s benefit ... whenever the Prime Minister goes, thousands gather from miles around to see her and hear her. Surely this is the mark of a truly great leader” (Mistry 312). Ishvar and Omprakash are forced to be part of the crowd for the Prime Minister’s speech. They are not given the promised tea and free bus ride. They return home thirsty and tired. They respond by saying, “We could have stitched six dresses, thirty rupees lost” (Mistry 330). For, common people, the Emergency is nothing but a “government tamasha,” or spectacle (Mistry 385). They feel they will not be affected by this government spectacle. But Mistry shows how commoners are the worst sufferers.

The first thing the tailors suffer is the bulldozing of their shack. This was part of the slum evacuation programme. “The bulldozers finished flattening the rows of flimsy shacks and tackled the high-rental ones, reversing and crunching into the brick walls” (Mistry 361). Ishvar feels some relief. At least their sewing machines are safe at Dina’s house. They pack their few belongings and decide to sleep at the railway station. But the station is full of beggars. A policeman arrives. He tells them sleeping there is prohibited. They realize they must bribe the policeman. They would have to pay him to sleep on the platform. The corrupt policeman is merciless. The novelist writes, “Money can buy the necessary police order. Justice is sold to the highest bidder”(Mistry 308).

The tailors remain without shelter for the night. The next blow comes soon. They are picked up from the footpath and forced to work as construction workers. Their work is for the city beautification project. Ishvar protests, but it is useless. They are forced into a truck like street urchins. For many days, they cannot do their sewing job for Dina. She becomes agitated. Maneck calms her. Maneck soon brings Dina news that they are mistaken for beggars and dragged into the police truck. At this point, Dina starts to sympathize with the tailors. When they finally return, she offers them her verandah to live in. Soon, she even shares her kitchen with them. The friendship between Omprakash and Maneck deepens. They are delighted to live under the same roof.

Ishvar then decides to get his nephew married. They decide to go back to their village. In the tailors’ absence, Dina buries herself in making her quilt. She thinks she can finish it before they return. She even decides to give the quilt as a present when Omprakash returns with his bride. At this juncture, Ishvar and Omprakash face a devastating blow. During a police raid on the marketplace, they are forcibly transported to a sterilization camp in their village—the so-called *Nasbandi Mela*. Rohinton Mistry masterfully depicts the callousness of the authorities. They are more concerned with meeting sterilization quotas than with the welfare of the poor. The novel describes the camp as cold and efficient, like a factory. There are long lines. People are treated as numbers, processed in large groups. The place is dirty and too crowded. Rules of cleanliness are ignored. Medical tools are used again without being thoroughly cleaned. The men are not seen as patients. They are just units. The goal is to hit a target number. The story shows the lies that were told. Men were offered money, food, or a home. These offers were very tempting for the poor. The serious, lifelong results were not explained. This camp is the novel's strongest symbol of the cruelty during the Emergency. It shows how a powerful government, with no one to stop it, can attack the bodies and lives of the poor. It destroys their most personal hopes and their future. In a perverse system, government employees have their salaries withheld if they fail to deliver a required number of people for the procedure. Beggars and homeless men are rounded up for sterilization quotas, **“The government has started a new campaign... They are offering a free transistor radio to every man who agrees to be sterilized”** (Mistry 441).

In this context, the Emergency gives a political angle to their suffering. The Emergency is a political game played by those in power. Common people like Ishvar and Omprakash believed it would not affect them. But

things happen the other way around. Commoners are the ones most deeply affected. By showing his characters' suffering, his criticism of the Emergency becomes clear. The story itself is his protest against its cruelty. Rohinton Mistry shows the "Emergency through the stories of four people, focusing on how their lives are changed, not just the politics" (Morey 112).

Mistry shows a realistic picture of the Emergency. He shows its horror and its impact. "The Emergency gave the Prime Minister complete power. Elections were suspended, and people's civil rights and freedoms were taken away" (Guha 505). Two characters, Ishvar and Omprakash, are direct victims. Two others, Dina and Maneck, are affected indirectly. Government programmes during the Emergency caused havoc. These programmes included the city beautification project and the Slum Evacuation programme. A government official justifies the demolition of slums, **"The nation's train must arrive at the destination of progress and prosperity. A few people falling off along the way is inevitable"** (Mistry 320). There was also forced sterilization campaign. "Many human rights were violated. One example was a forced sterilization campaign" (Tarlo 102). Dina is another character affected by the Emergency. The Emergency crushed her dream of an independent life. Another important character is Maneck. He was not directly affected by the Emergency. But he became a victim through its impact on the people he loved. His friend Avinash was a student activist. He protested against Prime Minister Gandhi's rule. He was arrested by the police. No one knows what happened to him after that. Avinash was his family's only hope. His disappearance devastated them. His three sisters later committed suicide. Their father could not provide a dowry, and society humiliated them. This news about Avinash and his sisters upset Maneck deeply. Combined with the tragedy of Dina, Om, and Ishvar, it shattered him. He could find no reason to live in what seemed a hopeless country. In the end, Maneck committed suicide.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* explores a dark time in Indian history when democracy was suspended and civil liberties taken away. The press was censored and the state was given extreme power. This created a climate of fear and oppression. For many, this was the darkest period since independence. The violence did not come from a foreign enemy. It came from its own government that targeted the country's most vulnerable people. The novel tells the story of this tragedy through its characters. Their personal struggles make the history feel real. Each character becomes a victim of the government's policies.

By the end of the novel, Ishvar and Om are physically broken. Ishvar loses his legs. Om loses his sight. They are reduced to beggars. This is a direct result of state actions. Dina is a widow fighting for independence. She becomes an indirect victim. The oppressive atmosphere empowers her exploitative landlord. It also destroys her fragile tailoring business. The Emergency crushes her chance at self-reliance. Maneck is a college student from the mountains. He is a victim of despair. He watches hope and humanity get destroyed around him. Witnessing this systematic cruelty finally breaks his spirit.

Through these interconnected lives, Mistry shows how state power worked. He exposes its malevolent mechanics. The government used noble slogans like "progress" and "discipline." These words masked terrible cruelty. Enforcement was not just through laws. It came through everyday terror. This procedure included midnight knocks on doors. It included the sudden arrival of bulldozers. It included the cold efficiency of sterilization camps. The novel shows the true horror of the Emergency. The horror was in the small, everyday acts. It empowered local authorities to dehumanize people. Citizens were turned into targets. They became statistics. They were eventually reduced to rubble. The characters try to maintain a 'fine balance.' They struggle between hope and despair. Their story is a powerful monument. It is a heartbreaking reminder of human resilience. It shows the spirit facing state-sponsored oppression. Above all, it ensures we remember the human cost. It shows what happens when democracy is eroded.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* presents a compelling exploration of human dignity amid conditions of state-sponsored repression. Framed within the authoritarian climate of the Emergency, the novel illustrates how dignity is systematically undermined through bureaucratic coercion, entrenched caste hierarchies, and economic marginalization. At the same time, Mistry emphasizes the endurance of dignity, portraying it as sustained by interpersonal bonds, collective memory, and moral resilience. By centering the experiences of ordinary individuals rather than political authorities, the novel urges readers to view dignity not as a concession bestowed by the state but as an inherent and inviolable aspect of human existence—one that literature has a vital role in preserving against historical and institutional erasure.

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