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[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Presentation of Political Upheavals in Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey*

**Charanpreet Randhawa**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

R.R Bawa DAV College for Girls

Batala

### Abstract:

Politics form an important subtext to the main action of all three novels of Rohinton Mistry. This preoccupation moves increasingly closer to contemporary times as Mistry tackles first in *Such a Long Journey*, the war with Pakistan in 1971 over the liberation of East Pakistan, second Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of Emergency in 1975 which affects the livelihood of the tailors in *A Fine Balance* and finally in *Family Matters*, the impact Hindu fundamentalist agitation and the Post-Babri Masjid riots had on the life of the ordinary Indian. His writings postulate on how these political events with their untoward consequences affect the nation as a whole and the Parsis in particular as a minority community. These calamitous political events give rise to fear and enticement. Mistry makes his characters his mouthpiece and makes them articulate his views regarding these incidents. The characters do exhibit stoic endurance and resilient resistance, though they apparently do so in vain.

**Keywords:** Politics, East Pakistan, West Pakistan, Minority Community, Parsis.

### Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is well versed with all the undercurrents of Indian politics. Though Mistry left India in 1975 to settle in Canada, but even then he has complete knowledge of Indian politics which is not far removed from reality. His novels expose the day to day activities of our Indian politics, as for instance, corruption, politically motivated schemes, layman's sufferings and the dominance of the corrupt officials over the downtrodden masses, etc. During his stay in Bombay Mistry learnt a lot about socio-political background of his country before he left for Canada. Jasbir Jain remarks:

Rohinton Mistry's work raises a whole lot of other questions specifically related to the 'homeland' and political memory. Neither nostalgia nor memory in itself can account for this rootedness and preoccupation with the homeland and the environment precincts of the city of the birth. It is also not merely the fact of being more at home or having a more intimate relationship with space back there. It is more than all these, a projection of the individual character, a gesture of expanding the memory to include both the specific and the universal. (qtd. in Bharucha 11)

### Analysis

*Such a Long Journey* deals with the modest dreams and aspirations of its protagonist Gustad Noble. However, it is not only about an ordinary man and his family. Rather Rohinton Mistry has dovetailed various narratives with the central narrative of Gustad. Mistry is concerned about the narration of some of the major events of the history of post-independent India. He has aptly deployed the feelings and apprehensions of a minority community to ascertain some

of the national events. The novel is written against the background of the unfortunate war that India fought with its neighbour Pakistan in 1971 which led to the birth of Bangladesh. Mistry has attempted to explore how the war casts its burden on the individual lives as the mammoth task of nation-building got entangled in problems and paradoxes. The Indo-Pak war of 1971 was sparked off by the election result in the two wings of Pakistan i.e. East and West. In August 1947, the partition of British India gave birth to new nations: a secular nation named India and an Islamic state named Pakistan. Pakistan was created around the ideological assumption that because of their faith, the Muslims of India constituted a separate nation. But Pakistan comprised two geographically and culturally separate areas to the east and the west of India. The western zone was popularly termed West Pakistan and the eastern zone (modern day Bangladesh) was initially termed East Bengal and later, East Pakistan. Although the population of the two zones was close to equal, political power was concentrated in West Pakistan. The West Pakistani political and economic elite soon acquired a dominant position in Pakistan's army, bureaucracy, economy and polity resulting in economic and political discrimination against East Pakistan (Chandra 239). This caused considerable resentment in East Pakistan and a charismatic Bengali leader Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, most forcefully articulated that resentment by forming an opposition political party called the Awami League and demanding more autonomy for East Pakistan within the Pakistani Federation (Kapoor 3531).

In December 1970, General Yahya Khan, the military dictator of Pakistan, held free elections in which Bengal's Awami Party under the popular leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman won more than 99 percent of the seats in East Bengal and an overall majority in Pakistan's National Assembly. But the army and Yahya Khan, backed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the leading politician of West Pakistan, refused to let the Awami Party form the government and they put Sheikh Mujibur Rehman in jail (Chandra 239). The Pakistani Army conducted several crackdowns in different parts of East Pakistan, leading to massive loss of civilian life. They initiated a reign of terror by killing innocent citizens. Survivors compare it to Nazi extermination of Jews (Kapoor 3531). For over six months, the army committed rape, torture, arson, brutal killings and other heinous crimes which finally led to the exodus of more than 8 million refugees to neighbouring India. The Awami League leaders, who succeeded in escaping to Calcutta, formed a government of Bangladesh in exile, organized the Mukti Bahini (Liberation army) and launched a fierce underground movement and guerrilla warfare (Chandra 239). The Indian government repeatedly appealed to the international community, but failing to elicit any response, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 27<sup>th</sup> March 1971 expressed full support of her government for the independence struggle of the people of East Pakistan. The Indian leadership quickly decided that it was more effective to end the genocide by taking armed action against Pakistan than to simply give refuge to those who made it across to refugee camps. Exiled East Pakistan army officers and members of the Indian Intelligence immediately started using these camps for recruitment and training of Mukti Bahini guerrillas. Then after gaining enough strength to confront the Pakistan army in regular warfare the Mukti Bahini, joined by the Indian army under the leadership of General J.S.Arora, ran through East Bengal and reached Dacca, its capital, within eleven days, and surrounded the Pakistani garrison there. Later General Manekshaw, India's Army Chief on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's command completed India's military plan. The Indian armed forces, having surrounded Dacca on December 13, forced the defeated and demoralized 93,000 strong Pakistan army men in Bangladesh to surrender on December 16 (Chandra 241-42).

The Indian contribution to the achievement of the freedom of East Bengal was so great that the people of Bangladesh viewed this country and its leadership as their genuine friends. The people of India on their part viewed with great admiration the courage and determination with which the East Bengalis had fought for their freedom even when the odds were heavily against them (Raj 15). Another factor underpinning this general sympathy for East Pakistan and its leaders was that East Pakistan was not supportive of the hostility and antagonism entertained by the power structure of West Pakistan against India. Instead it developed a firm commitment to the values of secularism, democracy and socialism.

Besides this, the fictional narratives of the novel are woven around the events of 1947-48 Pak aggression on Kashmir, the 1962 Indo-China war, and the 1965 Indo-Pak war. The inauspicious wars gave birth to inexorable history and in the present novel Mistry attempts to show the tremors of these wars in the personal lives of the characters. The author and his characters as well are witnesses to all these political events enacted around them. They are conscious of it and they react to these forces and their consequences in the narrative. Thus the two processes of the personal and the historical are imperceptibly intermixed in the texture of the novel.

Similarly, Major Billimoria's story is successfully woven around the pro-Bangladesh war of 1971. His story is a fictionalization of fact because it is based on the Nagarwala case of the 1971. Major Billimoria is a composite character fashioned out of the real-life State Bank of India cashier Sohrab Nagarwala and the Parsi agent from RAW, who was close to Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. Nagarwala was the man involved in the Rs.60 Lakh scam that rocked the Indira Gandhi government in 1971. He was accused of imitating Indira Gandhi's voice while talking over phone to the chief cashier of a nationalized bank from where he took sixty lakh rupees presumably for the fighters in Bangladesh. Nagarwala was charged with embezzlement and arrested. Billimoria tells Gustad about Indira Gandhi and the betrayal of his faith in her. Gustad is shaken by what he hears: "Everyone knows there is corruption. But to this level? Hard to believe" (280). Billimoria explains that he did what he was asked to do and received sixty lakh rupees on Prime Minister's instructions. Later he could learn that the Mukti Bahini received no money and the money disbursed by him had been seized by Prime Minister's office and transferred to a private account. Billimoria also observed that the money might be used to finance her son's car factory or for election. He reveals all the details of the shady deals and plans outlined by Indira Gandhi and how he was tricked into making a confession of his guilt in the entire scandal. Billimoria like Sohrab Nagarwala died in rather mysterious circumstances before he could be brought to trial. Laying bare the corrupt practice at the highest level, Rohinton Mistry has expressed his strong reaction at the disgrace of Nagarwala whose disgrace was a direct insult to the Parsis who had retained a strong ethical tradition. Mistry uses Nagarwala incident to bring together the personal and the political. The abuse of power and the corruption among the political elite reach out menacingly into the private lives of ordinary citizens.

The novel sheds light on the fact that political disturbances certainly affect the smooth functioning of an ordinary man's routine life. In the novel, we have seen how the conflicts and corrupt practices at the political level impinge on the life of Gustad Noble, the protagonist of the novel and his family. The war with Bangladesh is one such example. If there had been no Bangladesh war, there would have been no refugee problem and subsequently there would have been no need of raising funds for Mukti Bahini. And Major Billimoria who is closely linked to Bangladesh war would not have sent Gustad ten lakh

rupees and would not have decided to oblige him and would have remained free from trouble. But as it all happened, Gustad in turn involves Dinshawji saying that Billimoria's help is for national cause. As a repercussion of their help, Gustad finds himself along with his friends used and duped as a part of an apparent plot hatched by the Prime Minister to embezzle money. Thus, the ethnic community of the Parsis represented by Billimoria, Gustad and Dinshawji are unwittingly involved in the national affairs of India's involvement with Bangladesh. Gustad's remembrances of his childhood days, of the time when his father was a rich man and again when he was declared insolvent, expose his rich past. And his present experiences are closely related to the contemporary political crisis. The crisis in Gustad's life is rendered as part of the corrupt dynastic rule that hardly bothered about the well-being of the common people. This crooked rule is a constant source of threat for families like Gustad's. And therefore, living in the ceaseless threat Gustad has not removed the black-out papers even when they are no longer required. It is his attempt to blot out all outside menace, to ignore it, to repress it, so that he can keep his family secure. Dinshawji also criticizes the horrors of war and condemns America for supporting Pakistan who was then engaged in slaughtering people in Bangladesh. In another instance we find Dr. Paymaster diagnosing the condition of East Pakistan as incurable. He says: "East Pakistan is suffering from diarrhoea of death....East Pakistan has been attacked by a strong virus from West Pakistan, too powerful for the Eastern immune system. And world's biggest physician is doing nothing....Only the complete intravenous injection of the Indian Army will defeat this virus" (164-65). Dr. Paymaster's metaphorical use of language brings into focus the setting of the novel. He criticizes local corruption also when he says that India is like a patient of gangrene and the municipal corporation is merely the bad smell which will disappear as soon as the gangrenous government at the centre is removed. Dr. Paymaster has put the gravity of the situation metaphorically. Even a layman can see through the corrupt practices of the politicians. He can see that the government at the centre is the genesis of all evils. Once such people are thrown away from the centre, it becomes quite easy to blow them at municipal level.

As history and politics form a major part of the theme of *Such a Long Journey*, M. Mani Meitei observes:

Though Mistry is highly imbued with an original writer's imagination in the development of a flawless story in *Such a Long Journey*, his awareness of the contemporary social and political situation of India particularly the period of the 1971 Indo-Pak war is extremely exciting. As a realist he wields the weapon of satire which makes him a ruthless artist, a stern political satirist and a devout critic of war. His attack on Nehru and Indira Gandhi is unprecedented. (qtd. in Dodiya 82)

Mistry accuses Nehru of the humiliating defeat that India suffered at the hands of Chinese in the Indo-China war of 1962. He makes Dr. Paymaster his mouthpiece and impeaches Nehru for developing feud with his son-in-law Feroze Gandhi when the latter exposed Nehru's scandals in the government. Mistry praises Lal Bahadur Shastri who became India's Prime Minister upon the death of Nehru, because with his rule "the stagnant waters of government would at last be freshened and vitalized" (114). Shastri could do in the Indo-Pak war of 1965 far better than what Nehru did in the war with China in 1962. Dr. Paymaster rightly says of him: "short in height but tall in brains is our Lal Bahadur" (114). Mistry probes into various probabilities for the sudden demise of Lal Bahadur Shastri. In his sudden death at Tashkent, besides the possibility of a Pakistani or Russian plot, the role of Indira Gandhi is suspected: "so that her father's dynastic democratic dream could finally come true" (114).

Describing the year of war with China, Mistry says it was like a nightmare for the nation. The rioting curfew, lathi charge and burning of buses made the days dreadful. As Nilufer Bharucha states: "It marked the beginning of sordid power-politicking, corruption at the highest level, nepotism and cynical manoeuvring of the electorate. In Bombay it marked the end of its famed religious tolerance" (21). Further corruption was witnessed in the mis-handling of generous donations made by the countrymen. The corrupt officials of the ruling party took advantage of innocent people's patriotic sentimentalism and all the things collected in the name of donation were sold off in the sale at Chor bazaar. Nothing more than that could be done in betraying somebody. At the time of collecting donations the fund-raising politicians shouted through megaphones, impelling people to be as selfless as the soldiers who were fighting for the nation to protect their motherland. Getting influenced, the people were moved and swayed with their patriotism soaring high. Mistry says: "They threw blankets and sweaters and scarves out of their windows into the open lorries that passed below. In some wealthy localities, the collection drive turned into a competition, with neighbours trying to outdo one another in their attempts to simultaneously seem rich, patriotic and compassionate" (10). But sadly enough the goods collected never reached the place where they should have. Thus the war brought forth the bleak picture of the upcoming future which disappointed the countrymen greatly. And to make it worst for the countrymen their Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru was embroiled in family controversy with his son-in-law Feroze Gandhi. To the utter disappointment of his supporters and admirers he ceased to be the defender or champion of the underdogs. His only obsession was to secure a place for his 'darling daughter Indira' as his successor in the congress party. The congress party which they led was alleged to comprise 'crooks'. As later in the novel it is "called a rogues' gallery" (325).

In another incident Mrs. Gandhi was accused of having connection with money scandal. Sohrab voices the angst of modern time and youth, "our wonderful Prime Minister uses RAW like a private police force to do all her dirty work" (93). He also accused her of sending men from RAW "to spy on opposition parties, create trouble, start violence so the police can interfere" (93). He firmly believes that Indira Gandhi made a real mockery of democracy. He further points out that to increase her vote-bank Mrs. Gandhi pretended to be on the side of the poor, but in fact it was her political trick only. Mrs. Gandhi is also attacked for her nationalization of banks, for her encouragement to make separate Maharashtra state that caused bloodshed and riots and for her creation of Shiv Sena. From these accusations emerge the subsequent theme of minority community i.e. the Parsi community.

## **Conclusion**

Thus in the political context, Mistry has expressed his personal emotions and impulses in regard to the politicians in India through his created characters who share the same background with him. Corruption in government institutions is a reality in India and he has expressed this reality in the novel. He has accepted those parts of history which he thinks necessary for exposing the kind of reality targeted by him. Very explicitly he has shown how the common people lost faith in the existing system of governance.

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