

Constitutional Autocracy and Eugenic Sterilization of Dalits: The Biopolitics of Emergency in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

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Abstract

This paper critically looks into the representation of biopolitical measures brought about on the cusp of the de-secularizing post-Independence period through the prism of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). Imposed with the aim of racial modernization and brutal suppression of political dissents, the National Emergency (1975-77) was the culminating point of human rights violation, ethnic cleansing, and dispossession of marginalized Dalit communities in the post-Independence India. Drawing insights from the theoretical paradigms of biopolitics, the paper examines the caste violence vis-à-vis the capitalist growth in the wake of the Emergency. Focusing on Foucault's concept of biopolitical *nomos* and Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, the current paper attempts to question the arbitrary enactment of politico-judicial power during the Emergency through a close reading of Mistry's narrative. The article delves deep into the problematic connection between caste hierarchy and coercive laws, focusing on the devastating effect of urbanization on the poor. During the Emergency, one of the critical moments was the state's decision to enforce sterilization for specific disadvantaged communities, thereby encouraging the politicization of life. By examining the recently developed theoretical framework that argues reproduction control as a form of biopolitics, I show how the forced vasectomy of Omprakash and Ishwar in the novel is a minuscule representation of the state's nationwide drive for eugenic control of reproduction for racialized populations.

Keywords: Emergency, biopolitics, caste violence, racial modernization, Eugenics

Introduction

The imposition of the Indian Emergency (1975-77) remains one of the most controversial moments in the post-colonial history of India. At the time when the wounds of Partition and communal riots were still fresh, the declaration of Emergency exemplified how the state could use its biopower to relegate the lower caste citizens to what Kevin Bales would call "disposable people." While this de-secularising post-colonial period was characterised by communal disharmony, an unscrupulous quest for the political establishment, consolidation of caste hierarchies, and economic disparity, India witnessed an arbitrary enactment of laws that created a 'state of exception' in the

form of the National Emergency. Whenever a state adopts dictatorial measures to suppress its conflicting forces, we can recall the Indian government's extraordinary measures during the Emergency, including the suspension of civil liberties, censorship of the press, mass incarceration, and 'rule by decree.' The then prime minister Indira Gandhi maintained that the Emergency was a necessary measure to protect India from internal disturbances and political mass dissidence. However, the Emergency was also an epochal moment as Congress finally started adopting economic liberalisation by shaking off its decades-long statist economic rhetoric. The economic depletion in the aftermath of war for Bangladesh and monsoon failures in the early 1970s forced the state to acquiesce to external forces of Globalisation (Lockwood 867). Like the Western countries, the adoption of economic liberalisation in India created an economic and social gap between rich and poor as the Emergency created a conducive ambience for the burgeoning private industries to increase surplus-value production with a cheap labour force. Besides, the state's draconian steps to enforce sterilization for minoritarian populations instantiated the hitherto undreamt-of politicisation of life.

The havoc created by Emergency has been well documented in newspapers and non-fictional works, yet one of the best ways to imagine the nuances of the turbulent time is to understand it through fictional works. In the culture of amnesia of 1980s, novelists such as Salman Rushdie and Nayantara Sahgal kept the horrific memories of Emergency alive with their classics. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie critiqued Indira Gandhi's totalitarian rule, apathy for the poor, and blatant nepotism, whereas Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* is a trenchant commentary on Gandhi's usage of dynasty rhetoric, the role of the family in politics, blatant corruption, and the rise of Sanjay Gandhi. While these novelists mostly depicted the quotidian lifestyle of middle-class people during the Emergency, Rohinton Mistry, in *A Fine Balance*, chose to portray how the Emergency worsened the precariousness of Dalits in post-Independence India. Published in 1995, *A Fine Balance* examines many of the dehumanizing effects of Emergency on Dalits, including the eugenic birth control of Dalits, utilization of lower castes as cheap labour force, and slums' clearance. The history of Dalits and their stories take the central place in the novel, making it one of the narratives where Mistry delineates how the Emergency "was the next watershed in Indian political history and in the future of Indian democracy... [and those in the power] are playing games, power games and [common citizens] will have the same difficulty [in] finding food and shelter [and] nothing is going to change..." (CBC Player). The novel documents how in post-Independence India, the Dalits were subject to hostility and tyranny by the united force of the age-old caste system and state machinery. (Meirivirta 15-16)

The discussion on biopolitical governmentality, coincidentally enough, began to flourish in the late 1970s and early 1980s after India went through a twenty-one months' Emergency that regulated its ordinary citizens with biopower. Despite the apprehensible similarity between Foucault's seminal discussion on the state of apparatus and the autocratic repression of common people by the state during the Emergency, there remains a dearth of scholarship on this connection. This paper seeks to address this lacuna by looking into the representation of biopolitical stratagems of National Emergency in *A Fine Balance*. In doing so, the paper strives to probe into the problematic interlinkages between economic liberalisation, racial urbanization, and biopolitical caste violence during the Emergency. It also tries to show how Agamben's thesis on the 'state of exception' as the paradigmatic form of government can be a

helpful tool in scrutinizing the Indian state's normalization of lawlessness during the National Emergency. In this connection, we can notice how Mistry's narrative repeatedly gives a vivid account of the state's justification for the dehumanization of vulnerable citizens. Lastly, the paper explores the recently developed theorisation on eugenics that argues how reproduction control policies are forms of biopolitics that regulate the racialised 'Other.' Through Mistry's novel, the paper attempts to substantiate how the mass sterilization programme during the National Emergency had graspable continuities with the nineteenth and twentieth-century eugenic movements of the Western countries.

Biopolitical Emergency and displacement of Dalits

In his famous 1975-77 lecture series entitled *Society Must Be Defended* at Collège de France, Foucault provides some historical insights into the evolution of biopolitical governmentality in the Western states. To put it shortly, biopolitics is the stratagem by which the 'state of apparatus' maintains "the control of the biological" (Foucault 239), a relatively modern phenomenon with no historical precedents. Unlike the repressive regimes of the past, the dispositive government uses its biopower to marginalize and exterminate specific racial communities that do not fit into the biopolitics milieu. In his ground-breaking work *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (1976), Foucault contrasts sovereign power with biopolitical government. In the past, the sovereign power used to control its population through the symbol of "blood: the honour of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword, executioners, and torturers" (147), while the biopolitical state strives to capture the 'life itself'- by totalizing, objectifying, and individualizing the multiplicities of 'biological' into the discourse of history. In both the lectures: *Society Must Be Defended* and *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault gives a genealogy of race and racism, expanding the notion of the hierarchization of society through biopower. Regarding the logic of racism, Foucault observes:

What is in fact racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die. Its role is to allow the establishment of a positive relation of this type: the very fact that you let more die will allow you to live more. The enemies who have to be done away with are not adversaries in the political sense of the term; they are threats, either external or internal, to the population and for the population. In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable. Once the state functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the state. (255-256).

Though not a complete replica of racism, the Indian caste system is one of the less acknowledged discriminations in human history. In the caste system, the *Shudras* (lower caste) are positioned at the bottom of the socio-political sphere and made to do the most distasteful and hazardous jobs at minimum wages. In this disciplinary system, one's economic and occupational life is predetermined by hereditary line, and it gets its justification in the ancient Hindu texts. (Dumont 66-72) Not unlike racism, casteism is a component of the biopower with which the modern 'state of apparatus' keeps control over citizens, letting "the more inferior species [to] die out" (255). In post-Independence India, caste hierarchy has translated into economic liberalisation and developmental domains.

A Fine Balance weaves together the fragmented and disoriented lives of Dalits in post-Independence India. It begins with the declaration of Emergency in 1975 and traces the odyssey of Ishwar and Omprakash- two tailors who, like other lower-class citizens, face the brunt of the Emergency. Ishwar and Om belong to the *chamaar* caste- a caste deemed to be outside the Hindu caste system of four varnas. A *chamaar* is usually conceived as *Avarna* (*One with no caste*) and is assigned for the removal of dead carcass and shoemaking. Dukhi, Ishwar's father, has been performing caste-related jobs from age five. In the novel, Dukhi is conscious of the roles and rules of his caste:

[He] learned what it was to be a Chamaar, an untouchable in village society. No special instruction was necessary for this part of his education. Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere. And if that was not enough, the talk of adults, the conversations between his mother and father, filled the gaps in his knowledge of the world. (Mistry 106)

However, he does not want his sons, Ishwar and Narayan, to continue their caste's traditionally allocated jobs and have them learn tailoring skills from Ashraf Chacha. The rural caste atrocity is represented by Thakur Dharamsi, who enjoys impunity even after killing Narayan and other family members of Om and Ishwar. The incident testifies to the unequal power dynamics between Brahmans and the *chamaar* community in rural India, where lower-caste workers can be brutalised for asking their voting rights. In order to escape the wrath of Dharamsi, the tanners-turned-tailors Ishwar and Om (Narayan's son) migrate to Bombay (never mentioned in the novel) to work as tailors. In the city, they work under Dina- a Parsi widow who recruits tailors to deal with her financial crisis.

The sexual violence on the bodies of Dalit women often becomes a helpful tool by which the upper-caste men control the Dalit communities and maintain the rural caste dynamics. In the novel, Ishwar's mother Roopa is raped by the landowner's watchman, who sees her stealing oranges. Although rape is perpetrated upon Roopa, the narrator describes the sexual assault on Roopa through its psychological impact on Dukhi, her husband:

Dukhi pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew, from her smell, what had happened to her while she was gone. He felt the urge to go to her, speak to her, comfort her. But he did not know what words to use, and he also felt afraid of learning too much. He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night. (110)

The sexual exploitation of Dalit women by upper-caste men seems to be a normal phenomenon as Roopa does not talk about her rape in the next morning, and Dukhi also forgets about it. The inability of Dukhi to raise his voice against the mighty upper castes suggests how caste-based rape is normalized in rural India.

Mistry's novel suggests that the unprecedented anarchy during the Emergency is not the same for everyone- the middle-class and business persons found the environment conducive to the accumulation of wealth and maintenance of order. In contrast, the poor and dispossessed class, represented in the characters of Ishwar and Om, found themselves "at the mercy of one particularly vicious personification of the conjunction of

rural and urban, feudal and capitalist modes of oppression” (Morey 95). Mrs. Gupta, a representative of the middle class, is visibly content with Emergency:

“Now all those troublemakers who accused her [Indira Gandhi] falsely have been put in jail. No more strikes and morchas and silly disturbances” (80).

Mrs. Gupta sounds like the manipulated, Emergency-loving people who refused to see the plight of the lower class and wholeheartedly aligned with the nationalist rhetoric of the state. Dina’s brother, business owner Nusswan Shroff, brazenly exhibits his callous and materialistic attitude when he argues with Dina:

People sleeping on pavements gives industry a bad name. My friend was ...saying that at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated... What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy...One way would be to feed them a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is cost-effective. Lorries could go around to the temples and places where they gather to beg (431).

Nusswan's statement clearly highlights the escalating gap between the poor and rich that the Emergency generated. Rather than alleviating the plight of the poor, the state let the greedy industrialists exploit the working class to increase the production surplus value. Initially, both the middle class and the poor were confounded by the ‘state of emergency.’ When Ishwar asks Dina about the Emergency, she quashes the gravity of the situation, saying, “It doesn't affect ordinary people like us” (83). Commenting on the discriminatory nature of Emergency, Tokaryk observes:

For poor rural Indians, the phrase “State of Emergency” is primarily an economic force that first drives people into the city and then disempowers them. For wealthy urban Indians, the phrase “State of Emergency” refers more to a political program that grants business leaders either the liberty to exploit the abundance of surplus labour available in the cities, or the language and logic to argue for the elimination of the excess bodies altogether (11).

After a year into the Emergency, the seemingly tranquil lives of Dina, Om, and Ishwar are ravaged by the crisis of Emergency. In the name of ‘beautification,’ the government decides to raze the shanty towns, the habitat of Dina’s tailors. The government displaces a large number of vulnerable slum dwellers to modernize the place with no rehabilitative provisions for them. As a result, Dina’s tailoring organization is shut down, and Om and Ishwar are left with no job or shelter. The text suggests that Om and Ishwar are part of a host of workers whose lives were devastated in the name of ‘beautification’ by the powermongers. Though the panoptic gaze of the state does not target the workers individually, the police, as an agent of the state, ultimately capture and sell Om and Ishwar to the labour camp. Om and Ishwar work as bonded labourers in the labour camp, and when they try to assert their constitutional rights, the foreman threatens them by saying:

All you lazy rascals think you should not be here. The government will no longer tolerate it. You will work. In return, you will get food and a place to sleep (398).

Furthermore, the filth and corruption in the labour camp symbolize prevalent corruption in the administrative and bureaucratic sections during the Emergency. It testifies that administrators and bureaucrats were biased and took the government's side during the crisis. They conformed to the category of what Foucault would refer to as biopolitical forces of power. Analyses of biopolitical governmentality tell us that disciplinary power works through social structure and institutions. In the context of the novel, we may argue that the 'pastor' (Indian government) disciplines its 'flock' (working class) through social actors like police, landlord, businessman, upper-caste politician, and the existing caste structure. At first, the Twenty Point Programme¹ brought about new hopes among the poor, as the Prime Minister vowed to eradicate bonded labour from the country. However, in the novel, the 'beautification' programme, ironically enough, evicted the workers from a secured position and forced them to work as bonded labourers in the informal sector. In order to contribute to the Twenty Point Programme, Sanjay Gandhi spearheaded the 'beautification' programmes, causing mass eviction of the poor from slums. In *The Sanjay Story*, Vinod Mehta writes:

Sanjay abhorred slums. They were ugly, a breeding ground for disease and delinquency, an insult to a sovereign, independent nation. Sanjay's civilized notions went further. He believed people lived in slums, not because of economic impoverishment but because they were lazy—perhaps they even enjoyed living there [...] Sanjay was not concerned with the problems of slums or even with eradicating them. He was concerned with getting them out of sight—some place remote where, hopefully, no one could see them (Mehta 96).

Moreover, the pressure of Globalization in the 1970s forced elite politicians to subscribe to the disciplinary measures as conceived by Foucault. Even though the Emergency was essentially an autocratic period for the regulation of population, Mistry's narrative suggests it was also a period when "economic liberalisation [started taking place] which had previously proved impossible due to electoral pressure" (Lockwood 869). In the novel, the effect of state's liberal developmental programmes like slum clearances ultimately disenfranchises and cripples the weaker section of the society - in the end, Om and Ishwar are much worse off than they were in the beginning. Their subaltern bodies are commodified, disabled, and castrated, whereas Dina is compelled to give up her financial independence and stay with her condescending brother. Such instances highlight the effects of paranoid authoritarianism and dehumanizing modernization on subaltern bodies during the Emergency.

Lawless sovereignty and 'state of exception' in *A Fine Balance*

Giorgio Agamben, in his book *State of Exception* (2003), provides a glimpse of the ubiquitous emergence of the state of exception in modern society, a phenomenon that has its historical roots in the French Revolution and First World War. To put it simply, the state of emergency is a technique by which the state suspends the normative order partially or wholly so that it can survive in the face of an emergency. Agamben frames his idea on Carl Schmitt's notion of the state of emergency as extraordinary democratic measures taken by the sovereign during a political crisis. While Schmitt's formulation seems to privilege the sovereign's act of decision-making and shows how the sovereign state remains external to the law while suspending normal order, Agamben focuses on the sovereign state's legalization of the state of emergency. Agamben argues that the state of exception is neither outside nor immanent to law but "a threshold, or a zone of

indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other.” (Agamben 23). This zone of undecidability or “no man’s land” (1) is precisely where the state enacts the juridico-political exception in modern society: in effect, it is a tool by which democracies subordinate ‘life itself.’ Central to Agamben’s thesis is the idea of *Homo Sacer*- a figure, according to the ancient world, who can be both legally and politically convicted but cannot be sacrificed. In other words, these individuals can be included within the political and juridical domain only through their exclusion. For Agamben, the refugees and ‘stateless persons’ in the border and detention camps serve as perfect representations of *Homo Sacer*. They are included in the political and legal sphere of sovereignty through their conviction and “can be killed without the commission of a homicide” (142).

The unusual constitutional provisions enacted during the emergency in India can be associated with Agamben's theory of exceptional politics. India, during the Emergency, had become a democracy where ordinary citizens’ fundamental rights were suspended, and the state became a symbol of “sovereign dictatorship” (8). Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* is an important fictional representation that underscores the parallel between Agamben’s ‘state of exception’ and the National Emergency of 1975. In the novel, Avinash, the President of the student union, gives a glimpse of lawlessness during the Emergency:

Under the pretext of Emergency, fundamental rights have been suspended, most of the opposition is under arrest, union leaders are in jail, and even some student leaders... the worst thing is, the press is being censored (285).

The entire system of law and order had become crooked and biased during the Emergency, making the lower caste “disposable people.” Mistry’s first novel, *Such a Long Journey*, also portrays the disturbing times of the pre-Emergency period and the precarious life of ordinary people. Gustav, the protagonist of the novel, talks about the panoptic gaze of the government: “Nothing is beyond the government. Ordinary people like us are helpless against them.” (Mistry 419) The idea of ordinary people’s helplessness before the law is reflected in the characters of Ishwar and Om in *A Fine Balance*. The experience of Om and Ishwar- two Dalit characters in the novel- is a reminder of the tyranny and torture of the lower caste in the face of an unprecedented political crisis. Their journey illustrates the Emergency's two of the worst dehumanizing measures- ‘beautification’ and forced sterilization. By the same token, the true nature of the suspension of normative order during the Emergency remains elusive to the ordinary characters of the novel. As the rent collector, Ibrahim comments on the present scenario:

...with this crazy Emergency, you can never tell what law there is. The government surprises us daily. (408)

This statement clearly highlights the arbitrary enactment of law by the sovereign state and how the state remains neither external nor internal of the law. Instead, the Indian state exercises these special legal provisions by staying in the zone of undecidability. The Emergency allowed Indira Gandhi to ‘rule by decree,’ a special type of governance that permitted a single person or a party to change laws without legislative approval. By promulgating this law, the state turned Emergency or ‘state of exception’ into a “sovereign dictatorship... where no constitution or law applies other than the sovereign decision itself.” (Humphreys 680)

The state-sponsored violence on the bodies of Om and Ishwar is exemplary of Agamben's conception of *Homo Sacer*. They, along with other people from the lower rungs, are included within the biopolitics through their exclusion- displacement from shanty towns. The state devastates their seemingly quiet lives, relegating them to what Agamben calls 'stateless persons.' In the novel, when the Family Planning Centre cannot fill its quota, it captures random people from the village and forces them to undergo vasectomy. The *Homo sacer* is a subject who is given recognition in the political milieu only through his exclusion. The forced sterilization of Om and Ishwar instantiates how the state includes their names on a government list (inclusion within the political domain) only through vasectomy (their exclusion).

Eugenic reproduction control and caste politics

According to Foucault, the proficiency of biopower depends on the biopolitical regulation of life. The biopolitical control of the apparatus has been influential in the selective breeding of human beings. In *Society Must Be Defended* and *Will to Knowledge*, Foucault traces the importance of blood and heredity in modern society. Eugenic reproduction control is a modern version of older obsession with heredity and blood. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the politics of phenotype and racism played a significant role in mass sterilization programmes. As Mark G. E. Kelly rightly notes:

...eugenics is a discourse that is biopolitical, concerned with the breeding of an entire population [...] In the absence of the kind of sophisticated knowledge of genetics that we have today, eugenics at that time was based on a racist pseudo-science, on a theory of the superiority of certain races and the pureness of blood stock based in the older thematic of blood, but mobilising a more modern biologicistic, often pseudo-Darwinian conceptual framework, seeing races of humans in effect as competing species (105).

Birth control was central to most of the eugenic programmes in history. In the hierarchical society, forced sterilization was weaponized to stop the population growth of certain segregated races. The culmination of enforced sterilization was reached during the Nazi regimes in Germany. Initially, the Nazi eugenics focused on sterilizing those deemed genetically disabled by the Genetic Health Court. Within three years of the enactment of German Sterilization Act 1933, over two hundred and twenty-five thousand feeble-minded people were sterilized (Kevles 117). However, after the Nuremberg laws (1935) and Third Reich (1939), anti-Semitism breached the reproductive policies, and millions of Jews were sterilized regardless of their physical or mental condition. By vasectomising the Jews, these Nazi eugenics primarily aimed to establish the biological superiority as well as purity of the Aryan race (Longerich 94). The Nazi mass sterilization programmes were mainly inspired by eugenics in the United States. We can see a host of similarities between the centralized Nazi eugenics and the diverse eugenic movements of America (Friedlander 13). In the United States, the sterilization movements were advocated for the women of colour, including the "young, urban, African American and Latina girls" (Higgins 239).

A Fine Balance depicts the extent to which the eugenic Family Planning Programme has caused damage to those at the bottom. We learn that a mobile Family Planning clinic appears outside the hutment colony when the workers return to their homes. Rajaram, the

hair collector, is commissioned to persuade the slum dwellers to undergo sterilization. We can see the incentivization of the Family Planning Programme in Rajaram's words:

Patients get gifts, I get paid, doctors fill their quotas. And it's also a service to the nation—small families are happy families, population control is most important [...] They will teach you the job at the Family Planning Centre. Don't be afraid to change, it's a great opportunity. Millions of eligible customers. Birth control is a growth industry, I'm telling you (366-367).

For the state, it appears imperative to control the fast-growing population of minority communities. It sometimes works with local politician-cum-thug like Thakur Dharamsi in the forcible family planning programme. The forceful vasectomy of Ishwar and Om stands as the worst example of Emergency's family planning programmes in the novel. They represent the segregated Dalit communities who were randomly picked from villages to submit before the eugenic and caste-based reproduction control system. While recovering from sterilization, Om and Ishwar face the wrath of Thakur Dharamsi. He hatches a plan with the doctor to teach Om a lesson for his disrespect to him. Later, Om is taken away and castrated for displaying a relatively silent resentment against the murderer of his family members. While Ishwar develops an infection that ultimately leads to the amputation of his blackened legs, the possibility of Om's bloodline is forcefully ended. They are emasculated, disabled, and forced to live like beggars towards the end of the novel. It highlights how the Family Planning Programme of Emergency works along the axis of caste structure and how the Dalits are deemed unworthy of life. Thus, eugenic sterilization becomes a powerful weapon to determine who is worthy of giving birth and who will be born.

Both the Nazi and American eugenic movements worked along racial ideologies to improve the supposed purity of the superior race. In the same vein, we can argue that Mistry's narrative underscores the discriminatory nature of the reproduction control system of Emergency. The Family Planning Programme was specifically designed to discourage reproduction among the lower caste and maintain the purity of the upper caste of India. In the 1976-77 sterilization programme, over 8.3 million persons were sterilized, and most of them were enforced vasectomy (Haub and Sharma 14). In her analysis of the politics of sterilization of Emergency, Prajakta R. Gupte observes:

Among all the Asian and Sub-Saharan African countries, India's family planning program received the biggest chunk of international aid. The World Bank gave the Indian government a loan of US \$66 million dollars between 1972 and 1980 for sterilization (40).

As the Indian state received a large share of loans from the US, it became imperative for the government to fulfil the predetermined number of sterilizations through enforced reproduction control of lower castes. Like Western eugenics, 'blood as a symbol' played a significant role in the eugenic programme of Emergency. With the eugenic birth control programme, the state expanded its control over the population, eliminating disenfranchised poor in the name of development and small nuclear family.

Conclusion

A Fine Balance offers a kaleidoscopic picture of the Dalit experience during the Emergency, depicting the state-backed dispossession and sterilization of the segregated

depressed class. At the end of the novel, we learn that Indira Gandhi's paranoid autocracy and populist politics eventually led to the destabilization of the Nehruvian notion of a pluralistic nation, impairing the secularism of India. The novel's epilogue is set just after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and recounts the subsequent rise of communalism in the form of anti-Sikh riots. This phase of Indian history illustrates the hostile and brutal repression of vulnerable populations by the state machinery. Instead of working for the betterment of Dalits in the post-colonial period, the state used its biopower- in the form of 'beautification' and eugenic sterilization programme- to maintain the status quo in the face of a political crisis. The seminal theses by both Foucault and Agamben become relevant templates in unravelling the multi-faceted biopolitical rationalities used by the state during the National Emergency. By looking at the relentless precarity of Dalit persons in the novel, we can surmise that in the post-Independence period, the state astutely overlooked Ambedkar's clarion call for the annihilation of caste. Instead, the state politicised the lives of lower-caste people, stripping them of their democratic rights and legal status.

Notes

¹The Twenty Point Programmes (1975) was an economic programme initiated by Indira Gandhi to increase the production industry and agriculture. It tried to improve the poor's living conditions and increase literacy rates.

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