

Glimpses Of Contemporary India In Gurcharan Das' A Fine Family

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Abstract:

Gurcharan Das' novel *A Fine Family* investigates the reality of his own time to create timeless reality by zeroing in on a particular period in history. It is to be noted that a continuous assessment, evaluation and rewriting of the past in the light of the present is the mark of a vibrant and dynamic civilization. A society that forgets its past is deprived of the vast reservoir of civilizational and cultural wisdom that helps in forging a meaningful future which is an integral part of the process of nation-building. He recreates the ethos of his chosen period and thereby captures its prevailing mood. The writer seems to follow the postulation that human beings instinctively turn to their past for both inspiration and self evaluation. In Indian case this seems to be even truer because Indians pay special attention to their past as part of present day reality which moulds our life, objectives, our plans and our ideas as well.

Keywords: Family, Partition, Pakistan, Past, History, Resilience, Journey.

Introduction: *A Fine Family* depicts the struggle and hardships of three generations of Bauji's family chronologically from 1942 to 1983. In words of V.L.V.N. Narender Kumar the novel "brings out a life affirming dimension of the Hindu value system (which) can be read fictional treatise on the Purshartha" (152). The novel is close to the spirit of our own times and portrays simple and ordinary people and their vicissitudes in life during some of the turbulent times of our nation. The chaos of partition and socio-economic and politico-religious upheavals in India of 1940s and 50s formulate the base of the novel *A Fine Family*. The novel is thematically similar to certain other novels of the same genre such as *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh, *Tamas* by Bhishm Shahni, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar, *Midnight Children* by Salman Rushdhi and *Ice Candy Man* by Babsi Sidhwa. All these novels along with Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* are portrayals of

subaltern people whose lives and actions present a picture of India during partition: “They are the authentic history of the partition. They have not tenacity to prove the truth no craving or aim to say everything” (Cheni10). What makes Gurcharan Das’ novel different from other partition novels is the presence of a strong subjective narrative element in it. There is a constant shift from personal to the universal and vice versa in *A Fine Family* which makes this novel an objective piece of facts and events as recorded in a highly personalized manner. Though there is a narrator in the novel, he is never sufficiently detached from the writer and Gurcharan Das never hesitates to sketch a linearity between his own life, major incidents in socio-economic and political world and that of his textual world:

I can measure the passage 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 India...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 rules....when she declared the emergency in the mid seventies...paradise was lost. (Das, IU 3)

A Fine Family provides a vast canvas of contemporary concerns through varied situations, experiences and discussions among different characters, highlighting the shifting worlds of a family. The novel chronologically depicts different events of national importance starting from Quit India Movement of 1942 to Indian independence and later on from the partition of India to the fallouts of the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi. The rise and fall in the fortune of three generations of Bauji is symbolic of similar fluctuations faced by India in the corresponding time. The action of the novel is located in three geographical settings—Lyallpur, Simla and Bombay. These three places are inhabited by three different protagonists of the novel viz. Bauji, Tara and Arjun.

The first part of the novel depicts incidents in the life of Dewan Chand, also known as Bauji who lives in Lyallpur. He is an advocate by profession and lives in a sprawling house with his wife Bhabo, Tara and his three daughters, Big Uncle, his son and grandchildren. His peaceful world is increasingly threatened by the rising tide of communalism and imminent partition of India. He marries his daughter Tara with Seva Ram, an engineer in canal department, who is a quite, religious person. Tata initially does not like him and prefers her cousin Karan, who is a nationalist. Bauji falls in love with Anees, a Muslim lady teacher of his daughter Tara. While escaping from the rioters, he is wounded badly and loses one of his

daughters in the carnage. In his escape he is helped by Anees and he ultimately reaches India with the rest of his family.

The second part of the novel describes Arjun's childhood at Shimla and his tryst with love. Arjun and his parents Seva Ram and Tara are sucked into the upper class life of Shimla through Karan, Tara's cousin, who is a popular figure in the elite class. Arjun's love for Priti, grand daughter of Sanat Mehta passes through many ups and downs culminating in Priti's elopement with Karan and Arjun's heartbreak. Along with this development of love theme, the section captures contemporary India's slow emergence from colonial hangover through presentation of different characters such as Rao Sahib, Amrita, Chamba etc. It significantly delineates slow death of old order represented by aristocratic class and rise of a new mercantile and later on professional class on the horizon. In this part of the novel Gurcharan Das shows how India moves slowly but steadily ahead under first prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, forgetting the wounds of the partition. This optimism of Indian polity is painted through the character portrayal of Tara who doughtily faces all difficulties without losing heart and dares to dream for the bright future of her son, Arjun. In the whole decade of 1950s there seems to be a rise in hope about Indian political scenes where idealism of Nehru strengthens Indian polity and democracy. This optimism gets shattered when China attacked India in 1962. This aggression of China brought both public anger and disappointments with Indian political and bureaucratic system.

The third part of the novel captures Arjun's rise to success in Bombay and his incarceration under Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi. Arjun joins private job in a multinational company selling beauty and medical products and quickly rises to become its Advertising Manager. He encounters Priti in Bombay and decides to marry her despite the opposition of his mother. Bauji visits him in Bombay and when he falls ill, he is visited by Anees who had been in touch with him through Tara. Bauji, soon afterwards, breathes his last there and Arjun finds himself in confrontation with Guha, an unscrupulous trade union leader. When Arjun refuses to pay bribe to him, he is sent to jail for 15 months under Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). He is released from the jail after Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi is revoked. Indira Gandhi loses elections and Arjun finds his wife Priti drifting towards spiritualism. At the end of the novel, Arjun is a proud father of two girls and has progressed quite well in his job. Though Priti retains her spiritual disquietude, Arjun finds his family a fine one. The section dwells largely on the tyrannical rule of Indira Gandhi

which she blatantly used in politics and governance. Under her reign, Indian polity and democracy capitulated under personality based politics which culminated in the declaration of Emergency. Her emphasis on centralization of power in every walk of life including banking, business and policy-making created hurdles in the evolution of Indian political, social and economical values. In this section of the novel Gurcharan Das portrays Arjun as representative of modern India who has potential to fulfill developmental dreams of India. According to him young people like Arjun are not swayed by casteism or communalism, that is why he asserts that “hope lay in the private Individual” (Das, AFF 346). The novel ends with the hope that people like Arjun will lead India to the greatest height in future with their toil, skill and entrepreneurship. At the same time the text gives a warning that India of future should be a nation of all and its growth should be all inclusive. The writer advocates a broad minded nationalism, while asserting that the role of civil society has been secondary to none in the making of India of present age. For the bright future of the country the government, civil society and business corporates will have to tread together so that India can grow to its fullest.

The notions of marriage and romantic love as crucial points of conflict between traditional and modern notions come under repeated discussion in the novel. Tara, who is emotionally attracted towards Karan, thinks that marriage should follow only after love between individuals. Her question “why can’t I marry someone I know?” (Das, AFF 61) is part of her modern education based on Western ideal of love before marriage. Bauji finds these ideas as part of her romantic fancy based on alien cultural notions: “These romantic fancies were clearly the product of too much Western education. The English novels which these girls read were full of subversive ideas” (Das, AFF 62). In contrast to love-before-marriage’ idea, Bauji’s notions about marriage and love are based on companionship and sharing of ordeals of life together by husband and wife: “You will learn to like your husband. One learns to like one another *after* one is married. It happens. Liking is created by habit, common interests, and children” (Das, AFF 62).

Though bureaucracy remained and still remains immune to changes, as Gurcharan Das reminds us repeatedly India grew despite all the obstacles of red-tapism and corruption in government departments. The post-independence scenario in India was a growing clash between old aristocracies and a newly rising class of entrepreneurs. The novel traces generational shift in the family of Bauji with corresponding transitions in India. As India

moved from British ruled country to socialist model and later on to free economy after Independence, the Indian middle class also shifted from preference for government jobs to private ones. Bauji sums up these transitions in India through corresponding changes in his own family. While he as first generation acquired English education to get a job as a lawyer, he married his daughter Tara to an engineer. The profession of Seva Ram reflected need of the times when India was passing through heavy industrialization. With consequent shift to free market economy, his grandson Arjun joined a multinational company. Arjun's family represented "the ordinary life of a modern, educated, decent family. They were the representatives of a growing, urban middle and upper middle class that had rapidly developed after Independence" (Das, AFF 2015-06). This class conflict is part of a related clash between two value systems. The text of the novel realises this conflict as part of the texture of the lives lived by people living in two different worlds. The major thematic thrust of the novel is towards a compromise between the two systems wherein although the traditional value system is not outrightly rejected, there is a recognition of change in societal values with time. The following conversation between Seva Ram and Tara about Arjun brings out this conflict:

'You know I would rather he spent his free time playing sports and games with other boys. At his age, I only had thoughts of studies and of the guru. Arjun is a brahmachari, and he should think only of studies and god. Look at the clothes he wears! He wants to join the Green Room; he wants to learn skating.'

'But good heavens, he is growing up,' she smiled again. 'It is normal to want these things.' (Das, AFF 219-20).

The novel depicts Gurcharan Das' belief in liberal values as guiding forces both at the social/economic and individual level. Gurcharan Das' vision of India is very much influenced by his philosophy of classical liberalism. He himself accepts: "I am at heart an old fashioned liberal." (Das, "Introduction" XV). His liberalism fills his literary works with the ideas of pluralism, tolerance, economic freedom, women empowerment and open economy. As a general fact liberalization refers to a relaxation in areas of social, political and economic policies. While as a social policy it refers to relaxation of rigid laws related to civil rights, in economic and trade it stands for privatization, liberalization and globalization. Gurcharan Das' belief in liberal side of humanism makes him vouch for women empowerment and the role of private sector in providing human dignity and enterprise to poor people who need

basic health and educational services. His imaginative and critical world has significant similarities with the great tradition of liberal thought exemplified in John Lock, Adam Smith, John Milton, Raja Ram Mohan Roy etc. For Gurcharan Das contemporary India must be guided by these values so as to emerge in an atmosphere of prosperity and happiness for all. Some such values advocated by him are tolerance, avoidance of extremes, social utility, democracy, individual freedom and a respect for diversity. Liberalism in *A Fine Family* is revealed through an active interest in the diversity and a faculty to empathize with others. It allows a person like Bauji to see things from multiple perspectives and consequently see limitations and advantages from a comparative perspective. Gurcharan Das keeps his faith in human reason and advocates tolerance as a key virtue for contemporary India. As liberal persons both Arjun and Bauji in the novel remain open to the new and the different as worthwhile possibilities. They celebrate diversity and singularity in experiences and believes in human capacity to judge, examine and take decisions on the basis of empirical evidences.

The question of conflict between Hindus and Muslims which keeps on popping up throughout the novel has been examined from many perspectives. This investigation has a contemporary relevance due to an increased polarization between Hindus and Muslims in recent years. Bauji, with his liberal views, does not feel antagonistic to Islamic culture. He is rather full of praise for all its contributions to Indian culture: “I have always admired Muslims for their Persian culture and Arabic learning. I have also found them hard working, freer and open and more trustworthy in business matters” (Das, AFF 73). Bauji’s ability to understand and value Islam and its rise in India makes him see Lyallpur’s mosque as part of Indian composite culture: “Bauji had always admired the mosque. He did not see it as a symbol of an alien faith; rather it was part of his definition of his city. [...] Whilst to many Hindus it was a symbol of intolerance, to Bauji it was an impression of man’s transcendence” (Das AFF 77). A difference between Muslim conquerors and Britishers was that while the earlier one adopted India as their home and slowly mixed into its culture, the Britishers never became one with India. This alien quality of the English made them permanent outsiders. That is why Bauji feels uncomfortable while visiting Bombay. He compares Muslim rule with that of British one, and finds the latter one as wanting in its empathy: “Muslims also came as conquerors, but they assimilated into India. What they left behind—whether it is Urdu, or the Qutub Minar—it is a synthesis of ours and theirs” (Das, AFF 250).

Gurcharan Das' opinion about partition in *A Fine Family* is that the tragedy of partition was made more horrible by the inactions of the political leaders of the time, which was, in words of Shashi Tharoor "a birth that was also an abortion" (15). Though presenting incidents related to Partition as part of the narrative, this theme is not central to *A Fine Family*. The focus of the novel is on recording the transitions in the life of India through the story of a middle class North Indian family. O.P. Mathur has a point in this regard: "A Fine Family traces an ordinary family faces the trauma of partition with composure and balance" (10). Partition is seen in the novel a result of ambition on the part of Jinnah, fear in Muslims regarding domination of Hindus and miscalculations on the part of majority of Congress leaders. They were impelled by a fear of an unknown future under prolonged British Raj and believed that if they agreed to partition, there would be no more enmity between Hindus and Muslims. Karan captures the contemporary thinking before Tara: "The only alternatives were to accept a divided but independent India or to hold out for a united India and follow Gandhi into the political wilderness. [...] Patel used to say that once the cancerous growth was surgically removed, health would be restored to the body politic" (Das, AFF 156-57). Tara's rejoinder "he should have realised that such an operation leaves the body weak and susceptible to the slightest infection" (Das, AFF 156-57) is more realistic assessment of the situation and is a reminder to those who champion India as a monolithic entity and wish to do away with its 'foreign elements' in contemporary India.

Along with the blood-shed and hatred unleashed by communal riots, partition of India resulted in makeover of a community from an agrarian one to an industrial one. The novel chronicles tales of human spirit's resistance against all odds through success story of Hindu refugees from Pakistan in modern India. There refugees created business empires in post-Independence India and the rise of middle class entrepreneurship largely owes its success to their hard work. Bauji muses that their rise was "a testimony to the human spirit. After having fallen in the abyss, the refugees had pulled themselves out from the depths, made a new life of their own and risen up again" (Das, AFF 167).

An important contemporary debate about the rights of women and its impact on traditional Hindu society is discussed in the novel through the controversy surrounding passage of Hindu Code Bill under Nehru. The enactment of Hindu code Bill in Independence India is traced in all its accompanying political drama. The bill was opposed by conservative members of Congress and B.R. Ambedkar, the extant law minister, had to resign due to its

strong opposition. Hindu Code Bill which attempted to “bring about greater equality between men and women in marriage and inheritance” (Das, AFF 168) created a furore and both Rajender Prasad and Patel opposed it. Later the bill was passed in 1955 when Nehru staked his government over it. Tara’s adoration for Nehru for his liberation of Hindu women through strong legislation and his services to strengthen the democracy is even supported by famous public thinker Mohammed Ayoob:

It is fashionable these days to denigrate Jawahar Lal Nehru. Although he had his weaknesses, those who followed him regardless of party or ideology, have been intellectual and political pygmies by comparison [...] Nehru had a vision of India as a modern, secular state that would be inclusive and liberal. (9)

The stiff opposition to bill was part of conservative society’s patriarchal usurpation of rights of females and thus the contemporary debates over it latched themselves on fears regarding disintegration of family system under its impact. In the novel, a quarrel between Bauji and Tara focuses on how any attempt to circumvent the traditional inheritance to male heirs created an emotional upsurge. When Tara, along with her sisters, demands a share in the property of Bauji, her father retorts that she has already gotten her share in the form of dowry. Bauji thinks that the customs like inheritance and dowry cannot be abolished just by enacting laws: “How can these people think they can abolish dowry by legislation? Idealistic fools! No daughter in this country will be married without dowry. Just because there is a law, do you think people will do away with centuries of custom? (Das, AFF 169-70).

Another important historical milestone in the journey of Indian nation captured in the novel is Indo-China war of 1962. The war was largely seen in the domain of popular imagination in India as a result of Chinese betrayal of trust and was a personal setback for Nehru: “Nehru regarded the Chinese action as a personal insult, and it left him in a depression from which he never recovered” (Das, AFF 222). Gurcharan Das, with all his criticism of Nehru, does not forget that he was also the architect of modern India. He does not dispute the observation made by Nirad C Chaudhary that Nehru was “the legitimate successor to Gandhi, the true leader of the people who linked India and the world” (Guha 151). This enthusiasm for Nehru slowly turned into despair about his economic policies which combined with the defeat of India in Indo-China war eroded the optimism and “marked a watershed in the people’s perception of the working of Indian democracy” (Jalan 49). Chandra notes the waning of Nehru’s influence after 1962 war with China, while situating it in the “sad tale of China’

betrayal of its great friend” (201). The abject defeat of India in the war was a blow to Indian pride “leaving behind a heartbroken Nehru and a [...] disoriented people” (Chandra 209). The novel pits the arguments of those who saw the war a result of Chinese betrayal and their opponents who blamed Nehru’s lack of practical wisdom to understand intentions of a neighbouring country. Bauji, as a spokesman of those who championed pragmatic approach to deal with border issue, finds faults with Nehru’s lack of understanding in dealing with India’s neighbours: “ ‘It is Nehru’s fault for believing them,’ said Bauji. ‘He is too much of an idealist and forgets that the pursuit of the nation’s self-interest is the only responsible course for a leader. Moralizing must take second place’” (Das, AFF 192).

Gurcharan Das revisits the era of Indira Gandhi through the period of Emergency and probes causes and consequences of Indira’s declaration of National Emergency in 1975. Gurcharan Das does not spare Indira Gandhi for usurping fundamental rights of people through quelling of political opponents. In *India Unbound* he notes: “We were staggered by the insolence of her action” (174). In Gurcharan Das’s opinion the declaration of Emergency was a brutal attack on the largest democracy of the world. The political scenario during Indian Emergency is captured in the novel through Arjun’s incarceration in jail during the period. The suspense in the minds of people after Supreme Court ruling holding Indira Gandhi guilty of corrupt practices and the declaration of Emergency become part of discussions among various characters. The writer reports: “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” (Das, AFF 305-06). Arjun has to face blackmail from an unscrupulous leader called Guha and when Arjun refuses to surrender, he is sent to jail under Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) which “allowed the government to detain a person indefinitely without trial or without producing charges before a court of law” (Das, AFF 310). The tortures in the jail, of which Arjun becomes a witness, relate to physical barbarity meted out to so called Naxalites:

Through the open door Arjun could see a boy sitting on the floor, his wrists handcuffed, waist roped, one eye purple and swollen, blood trickling down his cheek. There was an iron trestle nearby. The boy was only wearing shorts and shivering with fever. As Arjun was led to his cell, he saw a policeman hit the boy with a rifle butt. Arjun looked quizzically at his guard.

‘Naxalites,’ spat out the guard. ‘Very dangerous! They don’t confess easily.’
(Das, AFF 311)

Gurcharan Das believes in India’s deeply rooted democracy and praises people for standing against tyranny. He sees in the episode of emergency a lesson for democracy and suggests that excessive power in the hands of government is a peril for liberty and democracy. The episode taught Indian people a lesson and made them more mature and enlightened one. As Arjun ponders over “democracy had taken root on the Indian soil. But the ease with which the liberty was snuffed out [...] sent a shiver down his spine, and made him appreciate the delicate jewel that democracy was” (Das, AFF 347).

A significant episode which has a contemporary ring takes place in the novel when a group of college students comes to meet Bauji with a petition to change the name of Lawrence Road to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Marg. The arguments of these students are based on the premise that as Lawrence was a foreigner, it is imperative to change the name of the road as part of Indian nationalism. These arguments are more or less similar to the reasoning of nationalists in present-day India who wish to re-write history based on the shaky grounds of superfluous ideas about events and persons. Bauji’s arguments against this change are threefold. Firstly, it is always risky to change history based on extant ideas, secondly as Henry Lawrence was a lover of India and had done much for Punjab, it would be wrong to obliterate his legacy. Thirdly, it is a destructive tendency and if we wish to honour our freedom fighters, we should create new roads to name after them. His arguments are persuasive and are applicable to contemporary spree to rename institutions: “the British Raj is part of our history. Although they came as conquerors, they gave us some of their best. It is now a part of us. We must not discard it easily, for the good might be lost with the bad. The same goes for our Muslim history” (Das, AFF 230-31).

Against these narrow confines of nationalism, Bombay, as a metropolis, champions the ideals of multiculturalism by representing India in its diversity of population and its ability to create a salad-bowl culture out of it. Dr. Khanna calls it a city for all: “Bombay is the only real city in India! [...] But Bombay belongs to no one. Muslims, Parsees, Hindus and the British—all of them made it into what it is today. And now people from all over India come to make their fortunes here” (Das, AFF 240). Arjun too finds the city mesmerizing due to its dynamic nature: “He admired the city for its great heart. Bombay was a miniature India which opened its arms to people from all over the country. It contained an infinite number of

social worlds, intricately woven, yet separate, which moved back and forth, over the same long strip of island” (Das, AFF 244). It is due to its nature as a modern city which was established by the British for purposes of trade and its character as a multicultural metropolis that Bombay is called by Bauji “truly a free city” (Das, AFF 249).

The urbanisation as part of contemporary India’s challenge to usher in modernity is taken up by the writer in reference to growth of Bombay as urban slum. The haphazard growth of cities which is destructive to open spaces of countryside attracts condemnation from the writer. Indian experiment with urbanization has been unplanned and unsystematic. The result is that huge urban spaces are created without any supporting infrastructure. Since urban centers provided job opportunities to ever increasing crowd of jobless people from villages, resulting into a heavy toll on existing amenities. Arjun sees disturbing visions of spreading Bombay from the window of his train: “From the suburban train he could see the urban stain spreading, eating away at peaceful old villages, driving back the coconut trees, smothering the once-calm lives in lazy bungalows with chemical fumes and dotting the shores of creeks with slums” (Das, AFF 243).

A Fine Family thus deals with various aspects of the contemporary India through the writer’s remarkable powers of observation of the human nature. According to Mathur the novel moves both on individual as well as social level and traces a similitude between them: “Against the exciting, dramatic and tragic backdrop of national events from 1947 to 1975 the novel sensitively explores the greatest Kurukshetra of all, the human mind” (119). Concomitantly, *A Fine Family* presents a deep consciousness of the land and its association with human beings inhabiting it. The names of the three cities-Lyallpur, Simla and Bombay are part of writer’s scheme to arrange the incidents of Indian history chronologically. If Lyallpur is symbolic of colonial Indian ambience which is full of political, social and communal conflicts and is witness of the cruelty of communal forces during partition, Simla stands for a resurgent India, which reveals the power of hope and rising national pride after the traumatic episode of blood bath during partition. Bombay portrays India in terms of middle class aspirations, freedom of entrepreneurship and communal harmony. This geographical sense in Gurcharan Das helps him in presenting India’s geographical vastness and spiritual greatness.

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