

A Fine Family: The Eventful Years of a Nation's History

Dr. Sreekala. B

Assistant Professor in English, NSS College, Pandalam, Kerala, India

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<p>Received: 30 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 23 Oct 2025; Accepted: 27 Oct 2025; Available online: 31 Oct 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – Partition, Independence, Migration, Emergency, Realism</p>	<p><i>The riots before and after the independence and partition of India became the theme of many Indian writers in English. The events in A Fine Family are reported before the reader in an objective manner and it is told by an independent narrator. The novel has three sections. The first one, Lyallpur, presents Bauji as a successful legal practitioner in the years immediately before Independence. The most important consequence of the freedom from British rule is the partition of the sub-continent. The communal clashes that accompanied it is the greatest catastrophe in the history of India. The second section presents the rebuilding of life in India by the migrant families and Tara's life in Simla. The events leading to Emergency are described in detail in the third section. The central character of this section of the novel is Arjun, Bauji's grandson. The later generation were born into a democratic secular socialist republic, and they are brought up by imbibing these democratic values. Hence, they expressed their moral indignation when freedom was outraged in the guise of the declaration of Emergency. To them Emergency is only a temporary insanity. The sufferings of the people at the time of partition are portrayed realistically in the novel. The miseries and hardships of an entire population who are forced to migrate from their native land is the most dismal consequence of independence. There is also the realistic portrayal of the tortures inflicted upon the victims of Emergency in the prison. A Fine Family provides a real critique of the Indian society from the pre-independent era till the post Emergency period.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

The events that accompanied the independence and partition of India is a terrible catastrophic chapter in the history of India. The riots before and after the partition and the formation of the two states -India and Pakistan-became the theme of many Indian writers in English. Many of these writers portrayed this era through a fictionalized mode of narration. Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Amitav Ghosh etc. are some of the writers who narrated the troubled period through

fictional characters and events. Gurcharan Das also finds his space among these writers through his imaginative representation of a family who lived in India in both the periods of history i.e., the pre-independent and the post-independent India. Gomathi Narayan's observation regarding post-partition novels is pertinent in the case of Gurcharan Das's novel *A Fine Family*.

Since the guilt for the communal strife and the violence of partition is strongly felt, it is but

natural that the search for scapegoats should be rigorous. Indian leaders and politicians are the most hated group of scapegoats on the fiction on partition, which shows the ordinary people, Muslims and the Hindus alike, as mere pawns in the hands of power-hungry leaders, a gullible herd misled by crafty politicians" (The Sahibs and the Natives,102)

II. DISCUSSION

The events in *A Fine Family* are reported before the reader in an objective manner and it is told by an independent narrator. The narrator witnesses the events in the life of three generations-Bauji who has the experience of a life in British India and the independent but divided India, his daughter Tara and her son Arjun; who has experienced only the life of independent India. They have lived through the most turbulent and memorable years of the history of India and have a direct confrontation with the hardships of those troubled times. These hardships confronted Bauji in the form of partition, while Arjun faced it in the guise of Emergency.

The novel has three sections. The first one, Lyallpur, presents Bauji as a successful legal practitioner in the years immediately before Independence. The dark clouds of a division on the basis of religion have already appeared in the firmament of Indian political scene. The admiration for the British on the part of the Indian people is slowly faded. Hence, Bauji hesitated for a moment when he was invited to a party at the Collectors'. He mused, "In the past an invitation to the Burra Sahib would have been regarded as a great honour, and the town's elite would have been scrambled for invitations. (*A Fine Family*,13). But he has self-doubt also. Hence, he asked" But chachi, do you think we are ready for freedom?" (13)

Bauji's attitude towards the independence of his homeland was a balanced one. He weighed the merits and demerits of the British administration in India. He realized that India's problem is not only in the alien rule, but also in the behaviour of the Indian leaders. "The mischief had been unleashed not by Jinnah alone (as everyone believed) but also by

Gandhi."(32) That was his attitude to the communal struggle, though he realized that these clashes are a strategy adopted by the British to prolong their sway over the nation. To him, all the Indian political leaders are dreamers. He is of the belief that their idealistic vision will never become a reality. Hence, there is no disillusionment on his part when India became free. But many a youth like Karan, Bauji's nephew, who fought for independence later changed to an affected and cultured socialite. This change was the result of the disparity between their idealistic vision of a free India and the reality that was India. Karan represents a cross-section of society of those days. The problems of socializing in clubs are a part of Western culture. Hence the conclusion that the colonial domination was social, political, religious and intellectual.

The most important consequence of the freedom from British rule is the partition of the sub-continent. The communal clashes that accompanied it is the greatest catastrophe in the history of India. Perhaps, it is one of the paradoxes of history that what was achieved through non-violence brought with it one of the bloodiest upheavals of history. The religious leaders who should have showed the way of patience, prompted people to kill each other. When Bauji asked the Muslim boys who came to kill him why they kill Hindus, the innocent reply of the boys was "because we will go to heaven. Our mullah says that a Mussalman gets seven beautiful women in heaven if he kills a Kafir" (100)

The novel as a whole is a depiction of the events that accompanied partition. Gurcharan Das has devoted a major part of the work for giving a word picture of these scenes. Incidents of looting and arson are described in detail. The rise in the price of things and shortage of food items present the social milieu of those days. The horror and terrible torture experienced by the migrants at the time of partition are revealed through the writings of Dr. Des Raj. It is presented in the form of a chronicle. The chronology of events reveals the atrocious and most despicable acts of the Muslims towards the Hindu refugees. Dr. Des Raj describes the mutilated and disfigured women whom he has treated at the refugee camps. Some of them survived, while others succumbed to these injuries. These atrocious and

heinous acts are not restricted to one side. The crimes committed by the Hindus towards the Muslim refugees are equally or even more heinous. Medicines and other equipment are not available at the refugee camp. The description of his patients and his primitive treatment have a pathetic tone. The extracts from the doctor's diary are presented as such in the novel. The intertwining of the narration and these extracts intensify the effects of these terrible facts and provides credibility to it.

The untold miseries experienced by the migrants is one the darkest chapters in the history of independent India. The novelist presents the miserable predicament of the Hindu migrants. "They fought for water and drank every drop till nothing, but mud was left.... They had to choose, whether to die of thirst or from the Muslim's sword." (110). The inhumanity and the humiliation faced by the people belonging to the two different faiths are numerous. Both the sides have to prove their faith in order to save themselves from the attacks, as the Muslim tongawalla in the novel. "They would have killed me too, had I not immediately dropped my salwar and shown them my circumcised penis." (103). Anyone who is less fanatical is branded as a non-believer or a betrayer. Hamid's inability to give shelter to Bauji and his family can be attributed to this aspect as he became helpless in a fanatical society.

Many Indian writers have dealt with the theme of partition. Many of them have the feeling that the politicians of the day have done little to tackle the situation. The political leaders are presented as power-hungry which aggravated the difficulties of the people. The main concern of the people when they heard about the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi was whether the assassin was a Hindu or a Muslim, as it leads to an outbreak of communal violence. Gandhiji sacrificed his life at the altar of Hindu-Muslim unity, when he was accused of being pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu and was shot to death by a Hindu fanatic. Seva Ram, Tara's husband was relieved to learn that the killer was not a Muslim, but a Hindu fanatic.

The second section presents the rebuilding of life in India by the migrant families and Tara's life in Simla. The refugees faced the trauma of rebuilding life

from the grassroot level. Some of them, like Bauji, succeeded in this process of rebuilding. But it cannot be ignored that they have also encountered the problems of partition and migration in the worst possible manner. Bauji lost his youngest daughter when he and his family attempted to save themselves from the firing of the attackers. Bauji who was wounded and had lost his health would not have lived to rebuild the life in the divided India, but for the timely care and attention of Anees, the daughter of the Muslim DIG at Lahore. It is noteworthy that she had wired to Dr, Hamid, another Muslim to enquire the whereabouts of Bauji and his family. Actually, the Hindu-Muslim enmity was a mass hysteria created by the foreign rulers. It was from his Muslim friends that Bauji's family got the much-required help at the time of their migration from Lyallpur.

The division of the nation to India and Pakistan is the after effect of the much-cherished freedom. In the novel, there is a factual report of the entire developments that happened in connection with the granting of freedom. The line of demarcation is drawn by Sir. Cyril Radcliffe in a capricious manner. There was no rationality behind this division. Unprecedented transfer of population, killing, kidnapping and rape are the consequences of this whimsical act. But who is there to shoulder the responsibility of these untoward happenings.? The tendency of everyone is to blame the other party. This attitude is voiced by Anees.

Who is to blame, Bauji? Your people blame Jinnah for breeding hatred between Hindus and Muslims because he wanted a homeland for the Muslims. I blame the Sikhs who started the killing in East Punjab. My father blames General Rees and his Punjab Boundary Force for their failure to keep law and order. (116).

It is great to be free from the foreign rule, but the price paid for it by the people is very large. People's faith in the leaders has faded. They began to misjudge the intention of the leaders. They can find no justification to the partition. That is why Tara asked Karan:

Why did Nehru, Patel and others agree to Mountbatten's plan for partition? Is it true that they felt they were getting old and wanted a

taste of power before they died? God knows they deserved it after struggling for thirty years. But couldn't they have held out for a united India? (156).

The wound inflicted on the minds of the people due to this disproportionate division of the country can never be healed. This division was a slight miscalculation on the part of the freedom fighters, who were the leaders of the time. Karan's words, "I think they also had a conviction that once Pakistan was conceded the reason for communal violence would vanish. Patel used to say that once the cancerous growth was surgically removed, health would be restored to body politic." (157) . The statement has historical veracity. But it was an error of judgement on the part of the leaders. Instead of curing the disease, the remedy aggravated the malady. But it was not the leaders who are disillusioned but the people on either side of the line of demarcation. They hoped in vain that the line should not have been drawn to divide the country.

India didn't have to be divided in 1947. And we cheaply sold away the birthright of the Indian Muslim. In fact, the Muslim majority areas which became Pakistan were the ones which least needed to be protected from the Hindus. It was the Hindus in these areas, on the contrary, who needed to be protected?" (285).

Even the Muslims began to think on this line. History proves that Jinnah had done a terrible mischief to the Muslims in India. He himself realized this at a later stage.

Jinnah's concern was only Muslim dominated areas in undivided India, not Muslims in Hindu dominated area. He believed that the latter would remain minorities and should not obstruct the freedom of a majority of Muslims in the subcontinent. But this did not happen, and a large number of lives were lost when respective minorities in India and Pakistan tried to cross over to the other side. Out of nearly hundred million Muslim population, less than a quarter lived in West Pakistan and less than one-third in East Pakistan . Over forty million Muslims did not go to Pakistan, and a large

number of Hindus continued to reside in East Pakistan. Jinnah had not visualized it, and had no idea how to resolve this problem" (9,10) .

The Muslims themselves believed that Jinnah had wronged them. They felt betrayed by him. The author points out this attitude through the words of Anees "We got swayed by Jinnah into believing that Muslims couldn't survive in India....and if Jinnah himself hadn't believed in it he wouldn't have left forty million Muslims behind in India" (285). But this disillusionment is only on the part of those who had an experience of the life in British India. To them, the independence of the country, the consequent partition and the transfer of people bear no fruits. They thought that nothing good was achieved by suffering these hardships. They found their leaders as dreamers.

But there is a wide gap between these people and those who have only an experience of the life in independent India. The later generation were born into a democratic secular socialist republic, and they are brought up by imbibing these democratic values. Hence, they expressed their moral indignation when freedom was outraged in the guise of the declaration of Emergency. To them Emergency is only a temporary insanity. They have not lived in an India ruled by alien powers, they have not lived in the anticipation of freedom, which also brings with it a threat of uprootedness. They have not experienced the pangs of segregation and the humiliation of being a refugee. But they have to confront terrible political problems. The period of Emergency is a dismal arena in the history of independent India. Democracy gave way to dictatorship. Bauji experienced the worst possible elements of partition, but Arjun, his grandson, had a taste of imprisonment during Emergency.

The events leading to Emergency are described in detail in the third section. The central character of this section of the novel is Arjun. The court order concerning the election of prime-minister Indira Gandhi and her consequent declaration of Emergency and the arrest of the opposition leaders are part of history. The people are concerned about the political happenings of the country. But while talking about these events, the family of Bauji never thinks that Arjun must become a victim

of these untoward developments in the country. In the novel, there appears questions which are pertinent even in today's political scene." Every five years people go to the polls and vote for whom they are told to vote. There's no real opposition; there's only the Nehru family. Is that really a democracy?" (306) The question is asked in the political context of 1975. But the question is pertinent as the novelist asks it later, and he has observed the political developments up to the time till he had written the novel.

Arjun was arrested and detained under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). He realized that he had become a victim of the Emergency. "This is Sanjay Gandhi's Raj, eh?" (310). He protested. In the prison, he witnessed the tortures inflicted upon a boy who is branded as a Naxalite. "... His wrists handcuffed, waist roped, one eye purple and swollen, blood trickling down his cheek. (311). There is no need to doubt the historical veracity of the inhumanities in the prison during this period. The only difference is in the characters. The manner of treatment and the sufferings of the victims are the same as is presented in the novel. Arjun also had a taste of the punishment inflicted upon a rebel in prison.

Gurcharan Das has tried his best to bring out the hypocritical attitude of Mrs. Gandhi, as she called an election after the Emergency. Through the thoughts of Arjun, he dissected the period of Emergency, its effects on the people's mind and the changes brought about in the country. The novelist expressed a mocking attitude towards the political leader who had declared Emergency and suppressed the basic liberty of the individuals, and later as a gesture of magnanimity, released all political opponents from prison and called on the elections according to the democratic system. "Even a tyrant, Arjun had thought with amusement, needs the people's consent" (325).

After independence, changes are visible not only in the political scene of the country, but also in the social scene. The Hindu Code Bill which was passed in 1955 by the Nehru government is a landmark in the social development of the country. Tara, Bauji's daughter, wanted to make use of the opportunity available through this reform. She represented the

young Hindu women of India who considered the reform a boost to their self-respect. But people like Bauji who belong to an older generation had only contempt for such a reform. "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?" (169,170)

III. CONCLUSION

Through the three sections of the novel, Das has touched almost all the developments in the independent India till the period of Mrs. Gandhi's return to power after the defeat of 1977 general election. Even the discussions about the Indo-China war and Nehru's foreign policy figure many times in the novel as it deals with almost all the eventful years in Indian history. The period of Emergency with its brutal and ugly aspects are revealed in this novel. The sufferings of the people at the time of partition are portrayed realistically in the novel. The miseries and hardships of an entire population who are forced to migrate from their native land is the most dismal consequence of independence. There is also the realistic portrayal of the tortures inflicted upon the victims of Emergency in the prison. The changes and reforms in the social system are also given importance in the novel.

There is the objective narrator who does not take part in the events and incidents, but who is a silent spectator of the events of Bauji's family for three generations. He is also a sensitive observer of the social and political changes of the period. Though his narration is in an objective manner, he is not actually detached from the entire happenings. At times he, the mouthpiece of the novelist, made it clear where his sympathies lay; and at times when he requires the reader's sympathy, he narrated it in such a manner to influence their thoughts and decisions and to evoke their feelings. *A Fine Family* provides a real critique of the Indian society from the pre-independent era till the post Emergency period by portraying how the intellectual and emotional trauma of the age affected the members of a family which is a microcosmic representation of the Indian society of the period.

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