



CHANGING FACE OF BUREAUCRACY IN INDIA IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL

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Introduction:

Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps one of our best socio-political novelists today. As an Indo-Anglian novelist Nayantara Sahgal weaves the large gamut of personal experiences into her novels, and they are both her strength and weakness. She also makes use of her knowledge of history to infuse consistency in her ideas, thoughts and beliefs, from which emerge her major themes. Her major achievement no doubt lies in her success as a political novelist. Sahgal is perhaps one of our best socio-political novelists today. She is authentic and vivid in rendering the contemporary Indian urban culture with all its inherent contradictions and imposed controversies.

With the change in socio-cultural and economic scenario Nayantara Sahgal examines the changing face of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is the backbone of Indian administrative system. The bureaucracy technically has been an efficient form of organisation but is seen to have exceeded its administrative powers due to its tendency towards self-aggrandisement, permanence in employment, and nearness to the political executive. The administration, which comprises the permanent and political executive, has taken up wider responsibilities with the emergence of the Welfare State; the interests of the citizens are now being accorded priority. The novels, taken up for the purpose of this study are *A Time to be Happy*, *This Time of Morning*, *Storm in Chandigarh*, and *Rich Like Us*.

In A Time to be Happy Harish belonged to the prestigious Indian Civil Service and he never failed in his unconcealed adulation of the British. Nayantara Sahgal describes his condition "It was as if the white man, weary for a little while of his burden, had passed it on to Harish and he felt it an inestimable privilege to stagger under it." (*A Time to be Happy* 19) The Narrator knows him to be a likable man and a good friend, in spite of being far removed from his natural surroundings. He is not surprised at Harish's alienation because it is the result of British education he has received. This pattern of education followed in India had nothing in common with the Indian masses. His condition is similar to all who are products of such an educational pattern e.g. Girish.

The Narrator tries to analyse Harish's problems in the changed political and historical situation. Poor Harish, now remained in office beyond five, and missed his regular game of billiards and punctual visits to the club. But more serious than this was the stark reality of having lost the race. Even as the Secretary in the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, he had achieved little or paradoxically nothing. Sahgal's ironical comment on Harish's sad realization that the man above him was a so-called dhotiwallah cannot be missed. Describing his predicament she writes "Harish was



like the man who took a circuitous route home to avoid meeting an unpleasant acquaintance, only to find the unwelcome creature not merely awaiting him, but in full possession of his house. A dismal home coming indeed.”

(*A Time to be Happy* 251)

Dhiraj Singh an I.C.S. Officer, in *This Time of Morning* strives to get a better posting when he comes to know he is posted in Burma. He is not only angry but furious on hearing the news. “How dare they contemplate sending him to the back of beyond? He was surely earmarked for better things.” (*This Time of Morning* 97) In his attempt to get the posting changed, Dhiraj Singh approaches Kalyan Sinha, now Minister without a Portfolio, who immediately assesses the real reasons behind Dhiraj Singh not wanting to go to Burma. It was not due to his wife’s ill health, which Dhiraj gives as a reason for declining posting but simply that he desired a European posting. Yet Kalyan knew the usefulness of men of Dhiraj Singh’s kind, and so Dhiraj is saved from the trauma of going to Burma. His manipulations do not however, miss the hawk eyes of a cartoon journalist, Jeevan, who features him in an article “Whose Going to Burma? In his ‘The Wayfarer.’ Below the mock report “there was a cartoon of an Indian diplomat being forced into a train marked Rangoon Express, and the doggerel.

“If all the world were western
And all its people white,
the I.C.S. would have such fun,
And every post be right” (*This Time of Morning* 121)

Rakesh, an IAS officer the protagonist of the novel is educated and intelligent, comes from a good family background and has a distinguished job. He also possesses a deep, analytical understanding of human nature and most important of all, believes in moral and ethical values. He believes that the state of dialogue is possible only in an atmosphere of freedom.

He recognizes that the people like Kalyan Sinha, are dangerous to society because they try to enslave through personal magnetism. So he cannot even think of arguing a point or discussing a topic with Kalyan. Rakesh, who desires to meet him again and join his discussion groups, recognizes the change in him. Thus *This Time of Morning* may be said to symbolise both hope and a new beginning. Sahgal succeeds in creation of Rakesh, to a remarkable degree achieves the dimension of depth in the resolution of his tension concerning identity and communication.

Vishnu, the son of Dhiraj, a corrupt I.C.S. officer in collusion with such equally corrupt politicians -as Hari Mohan, a moral profligate, and Somnath, a political opportunist, is held up as a common foreign educated Indian type. In point of fact, Sahgal means to satirize such lazy fellows rather than attempt to pass on any sociological information about Indian young men who are educated abroad.

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, it is Vishal Dubey who has the courage to defy established and out-dated ideas which did not recognize the full merits of human beings. Vishal Dubey was chosen by the Home Minister as the liaison officer between



the centre and the newly divided states of Punjab and Haryana. The only reason is the Home Minister chooses Dubey was because he had studied him carefully when he was a ration officer in the refugee camps at the time of the partition of the country and found out that he has the ‘capacity to counsel patience’ and the reputation “for tackling a problem at the human level.” (*Storm in Chandigarh* 14)

Dubey believes in full involvement with his work and has a zest for life. He wants to live life according to his own convictions. Thus he differs radically from his colleagues who usually conform to routine patterns of behaviour for self-satisfaction. Sahgal tells us “It was not how he understood the richness of ambition. The road to Delhi and the fat jobs was its opposite. It seemed a lack of zest that kept men riveted there till they retired. It needed insensitivity to all the possibilities of living to be able to do that. Ambition had more compelling faces.” (*Storm in Chandigarh* 28)

Dubey’s dynamism is further reflected in the unique way in which he sees ethics and morality in life. He recognizes the need for both these things in everyday existence, yet does not succumb to the usual, known philosophy of these concepts. He distinguishes between the two, and has very definite views about morality. He tells Trivedi, his senior colleague “...I’ve decided not to accept the established ideas about morality, not to be bound hand and foot.

I-for me-well, I’ve thought about it a bit, a good bit, and I’ve come to the conclusion there’s a higher morality than all that. In fact, that’s what I call it, the Higher Morality.” Dubey defines higher Morality, as something more than the voice of conscience. He says “It’s a search for value, and an attempt to choose the better value, the real value, in any situation, and not just do what’s done or what is expected.”(*Storm in Chandigarh* 86)

Vishal Dubey is willing and even happy in going to Chandigarh. He had recently started feeling that his days in Delhi had somewhat destroyed the life in him. More than anything he needed an assurance for himself that he was not succumbing to the “rut of seniority, promotion, and spiritual vacuum.” (*Storm in Chandigarh* 16) To escape from this routine he had already applied for an American grant to write a book on “*The role of Buddhism in [Indian] Culture.*”

This is the restlessness which distinguishes Dubey from his colleagues, and as he prepares himself with the facts and figures for his difficult task, Nayantara Sahgal raises the most pertinent question in the whole novel and reveals her shrewd political foresight, Sahgal writes:

There was one question Dubey had not asked the Home Minister. It was why, in the first place, the Centre had allowed the Punjab to be redivided twenty years after the grueling Partition of 1947. Why had this new mess been created? It was the kind of question civil servants did not ask politicians.”(*Storm in Chandigarh* 20)



Seeing the present conditions in Punjab in the 1980's, with violence, terrorism and the demand for yet another partition from India, one wishes that responsible civil servants and vigilant citizens did ask such seemingly awkward questions of the politicians. Nayantara Sahgal's accurate and perfect understanding of politics is revealed even further, when she describes the reasons and methods by which the old Punjab had come to be redivided, twenty years after independence.

Dubey suggests Harpal Singh that he has to take a stand against the violent attitude of Gyan Singh. Dubey feels that the strategy which now needs to be pursued is not the old home minister's 'wait and watch' but 'resist and act'. The strike is unsuccessful partly because of this move, but more so because, once again accident plays another positive part in Gyan Singh's life. The sudden death of the old minister in Delhi is symbolic of the passing away of the Gandhian era, but periodically it is a precious opportunity for Gyan Singh to call off the strike and save his face.

Dubey's satisfaction however is short-lived. Back in Delhi, he realizes much to his dismay, that everyone including his senior officers was happy that a confrontation had been avoided. It occurs to him that now people were satisfied by finding temporary solutions. No one really wants to go into the details of a problem and involved themselves with the roots to find answers. This, Dubey feels, is a grave wrong but not even his colleagues seem to have faith in its convictions. He discovers himself to be a lonely crusader in his search for action to oppose things which were wrong.

Nayantara Sahgal is fully aware that if the politicians were failing in their duty to Bharat Mata, the civil service men were no better, for shirking their responsibilities, because "Upon them had rested the onus of the transition from servitude to freedom, a mighty task by any standards. And today they were divided not on principle or convictions, but by nauseating hypocrisies." (*Storm in Chandigarh* 251) Thus, Sahgal successfully depicts that only moral and ethical values can bring about the desired change in society.

In Rich Like Us the sincere officers and civil servants had become virtually "like cherry stones on a plate, not like people." (*Rich Like Us* 86) Ravi Kachru, a shrewd administrator who had managed to ride the tide of popularity in the early days of the Emergency, eventually falls from grace when he sticks his neck out to question the illegal transactions of Dev, now a Cabinet minister in Madam's government. Ravi Kachru in *Rich Like Us*, was an idealist when he was a student at Oxford. He and Sonali could not "agree on step three and step four of the Marxist processes, whatever that was, and especially what happened to artists and writers and thinkers at that point..." (*Rich Like Us* 180) But he falls into the trap of Emergency which is declared only for the sake of paving way for one-family rule. Sonali wonders how one can make a "journey from the communist manifesto to royalist?" (*Rich Like Us* 52)

Ravi Kachru becomes one among the numerous psychopaths who begin to view with each other in taking groups to congratulate the prime minister, planting



trees and preventing their servants from having children. But when Sonali successfully infuses reason into him by constant questioning, Ravi rightly finds out that there is truth in her argument and recognizes that Emergency has become a cover for different kinds of atrocities to prolong the family rule. He is bold enough to plead the rights of Rose though he knows that Dev has connection with the 'High Command'. As a result of it he is demoted to a Joint Secretary and he knows that he will soon be shunted out of Delhi.

Sonali is a thirty-eight-year-old I.A.S. officer who, as the narrative progresses, finds herself in disfavour with the authorities that be. She does not support the changing tide. Her opinions, which in turn govern her options, are always consistent. Therefore, it is only Sonali who understands her father's commitment to freedom. He has been an .I.C.S. officer who had joined the services reluctantly. With Independence he became reconciled to his duties "with the energy of a whole, not a divided man." (*Rich Like Us* 148) When the Emergency was imposed, he had no duty to perform: he was a retired civil servant "refusing to compromise with dictatorship." (*Rich Like Us* 157) Sonali understands why her father could not bear to live through times when "...history would now be revised and rewritten. I can see that he had to die when he did, but his death left me desperately alone when I faced dismissal." (*Rich Like Us* 157) Influenced by her strong and uncompromising father, Sonali grew up believing that the democracy of Gandhiji and Pandit Nehru should never be allowed to die.

Sonali empathized with her father's sense of loss, as he anticipated the slow but inevitable death of democracy with the Nationalization of Banks in the year 1969. Even so, she had hoped that perhaps they were judging too hastily, and that could be beginning of some genuine revolutionary changes to follow. With the declaration of Emergency, she had to accept how accurate her father's predictions had been. She had to deal with the reality of the dictatorships alone as she lost her post as the Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industry. This was because she had refused to pass a foreign soft drink product. Humiliated, she does, what Sahgal says no one did at that time, she resigns.

Sonali is able to recognize the real Ravi, the changeling. Sonali could have gone overboard with love for Ravi. They seemed to have so much in common, starting of course, with their backgrounds. As students they fervently espoused Marxism and, later, embarked on the journey of public service as I.A.S. officers. Fortunately, Sonali understood that Ravi always wanted to move on, be part of the next revolution, so that he had been at best a "romance" with Marxism. This attitude of his persisted even on his return to Delhi when he espoused any change introduced in the system with vigour, whether it meant the Nationalization of Banks or, later, the Emergency, Sonali on the other hand, alone with her papa, did not see these as examples of democracy.

During the Emergency, Sonali asks Ravi to help Rose. He does so far, he admits later that, because he had always failed her tests and had wanted to measure up for once. "You've always been so 'burning bright,'" (*Rich Like Us* 230) he tells



her. Sonali recognizes the positive change in Ravi. Sonali's relationship with her Maharastrian Saraswat Brahmin father is different. A retired I.C.S. officer, he does not seem to share his wife's belief that the Kashmiri Brahmin is the sole remnant of the pure Hindu Aryan race. Nor does he believe in abusing the democratic norms that made India free.

Sonali is Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industry. Unaware of the secret deal between the Minister and a foreign businessman and his Indian collaborator about the setting up of a fizzy drink factory, she writes an unfavourable note on the file because the project, so unimportant for the country, is wasteful of precious foreign exchange. Sonali is promptly transferred to her home state and demoted, Sonali realizes that her administrative training has not prepared her for handling the new situation which has arisen out of political concerns dominating the administrative.

Sonali is unwilling to bend the rules to suit people or to liberally interpret them. Therefore she has to be transferred and demoted all in one stroke. Now when she is pushed out of the corridors of power, she begins to realize how the rot had set in. How silence had led to further demands on one's loyalty – and how loyalty and courage had begun to seem incompatible: “Nothing anywhere made sense, since in a moral universe either everything must have meaning or nothing. Memory dragged me backward to reports I had read with momentary shock and then deliberately pushed away because they were too terrible to remember.” (*Rich Like Us* 29-30)

Sonali is quite different from the stereotype of women found in Indo-English fiction. Her problem is not marital disharmony or male domination. Her problem is how to cope with the hypocrisy, red-tapism and corruption that have crept into the Indian Administrative Service? She is intelligent and independent yet committed to communal good. In the wake of Emergency as she refuses to interpret rules to the advantage of her political bosses, she is transferred without warning, demoted, and punished. A revolt against the authoritarianism of the ruling government which has already been smoldering itself into a rage inside her, now becomes an uncontrollable fury and she decides that she can no longer be a party to the widespread conspiracy of silence that is Civil Service.

Sonali values individual freedom above everything else. To accept and to resign herself to fate has never been her line of thinking. To question, to rebel and to demand explanations- this has always been her nature. Her decision to resign from the Civil Service is precisely her refusal to compromise with dictatorship. Sonali says “When the constitution becomes null and void by the act of a dictator, and the armour of a modern state confronts you, Satyagraha is the only way to keep your self-respect.” (*Rich Like Us* 157) Her mode of Satyagraha is to opt out of the oppressive, corrupt regime. Sahgal's Sonali is symbolic the new woman of modern India.

The novels discussed in this article throw light on the deteriorating bureaucratic system in Post Independent India. They show how connection between “the corrupt and psychopant bureaucrats and the opportunist politicians” has eroded



the Indian society and its long cherished values. The officers who compromise their values and give in to the greedy, inefficient and irresponsible politicians are promoted to higher officer, whereas the sincere, honest and righteous officers are demoted and humiliated. The novels in short explore the economic disparities, rampant corruption and the pressure of power in Post Independent India.

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