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Historical Deviations and Parallels in Vikas Sharma's Novel *Hell for the People*

Poorvi Garg, Research Scholar, Department of English, CCS University, Meerut.

Abstract: This research paper examines the historical deviations and parallels in Vikas Sharma's novel *Hell for the People* (2025). The novel presents Indian political history through a combination of historical facts, fictional narration and literary imagination. It moves from the Mughal period to contemporary India and discusses major events such as the Emergency, the political career of Rajmata Gayatri Devi, the Gujarat riots, the rise of the BJP, the Anna Hazare movement, Shaheen Bagh and the Modi era. The paper studies how Sharma modifies, compresses, or rearranges certain historical events to suit the narrative of the novel. It also compares selected events with historical sources to identify similarities and factual deviations. The study argues that Sharma does not present history as a simple record of facts. Instead, he uses fiction to explore political power, ambition, conflict, corruption and the suffering of ordinary people. The novel repeatedly draws parallels between different periods of Indian history and suggests that patterns of power and its misuse continue across time. The paper therefore explores *Hell for the People* as a literary representation of history and examines how fiction can reshape our understanding of political events.

Keywords: Historical Fiction; Indian Political History; Historical Deviations; Political Power



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Introduction

Vikas Sharma's novel *Hell For The People* (2025) occupies a rare space in contemporary Indian English fiction. It is neither a straightforward historical account nor a purely imaginative work of fiction. Instead, it is a bold combination of the two. A narrative that sweeps across centuries of Indian political history, from the Mughal invaders all the way to the India of Narendra Modi weaves real events with fictionalized characters and altered names. The novel is written in a descriptive and narrative style, yet reads almost like a political document — a chronicle of power, ambition, corruption and the suffering of ordinary people caught in the crossfire of those who govern them.

What makes the novel particularly interesting for a literary study is the way Vikas Sharma handles historical material. A creative artist always enjoys a certain freedom when dealing with history. Literature and history are intimately related to each other, yet they are also in constant tension. History demands factual accuracy. Literature demands emotional and artistic truth. When the two are combined, as Sharma does in this novel, the result is a work that both illuminates and deviates from the historical record. Sharma himself acknowledges this delicate balance in his Preface, declaring: "As a narrator, I wish to be truthful and I'm prepared to pay the cost for it." (Sharma, 3)

This research paper examines the key historical deviations and parallels found in the novel which is organized around the major political episodes that Sharma covers. It aims to show how Sharma uses fiction to comment on real events, sometimes altering facts for narrative purposes and sometimes drawing striking parallels between different eras and figures of Indian history.

The Emergency Imposed by Indira Gandhi (1975)

One of the central episodes of the novel is the Emergency declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 25th June 1975. Sharma devotes considerable attention to this period which portrays the arrest and imprisonment of opposition leaders in Tihar Jail with vivid, almost cinematic detail. He describes the shock and humiliation experienced by senior politicians like Morarji Desai, Chaudhary Charan Singh and Madam Tarkeshwari Sinha who were forced to share barracks, eat prison food and endure the summer heat of June without fans or newspapers. Sharma draws a historical parallel between the Emergency and earlier episodes of authoritarian rule. He likens the suspension of fundamental rights to the tyranny of past kings and emperors. Just as Aurangzeb imprisoned his own father Shah Jahan in a fort, Sharma suggests, Indira Gandhi imprisoned the democratic freedoms of an entire nation.

The novel also highlights the role of Siddhartha Shanker Ray, her political adviser, who suggested that the identities and locations of political prisoners be kept secret. This proposal was ultimately rejected. What is historically accurate in Sharma's account is the broad sequence of events. On 12 June 1975, Justice Jagmohan Lal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court found the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi guilty of electoral malpractice in the 1971 election case brought by Raj Narain and he declared her election null and void. The Supreme Court granted only a conditional stay on 24 June, and the very next night, 25 June 1975, Gandhi advised President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to proclaim a national Emergency under Article 352 (Krishnan; Organiser). Thousands of opposition workers were arrested that same night; fundamental rights were suspended and press censorship followed within days. The novel reproduces this sequence faithfully. Where Sharma deviates is in his literary embellishment of individual scenes like the lipstick episode involving Madam Tarkeshwari Sinha where Mrs. Sinha asks Desai whether her lipstick looks smooth on her lips. Desai responds: "How do I know? I don't know about this kind of smoothness." (Sharma, 22) It is almost certainly a fictional invention, designed to humanize the suffering of imprisoned leaders and to create a moment of dark comedy without distorting the essential truth of the Emergency period.

The Jaipur Maharani (Rajmata Gayatri Devi)

The novel's treatment of the Rajmata of Jaipur is one of its most emotionally rich sections. Sharma uses the fictionalized umbrella of "Rajmata" and alters certain specifics like blending aspects of the Jaipur and Gwalior royal families into a composite character. This historical inspiration from Maharani Gayatri Devi is unmistakable. The novel describes the Rajmata as a woman of exceptional beauty, dignity and political conviction. Sharma suggests, through his narrative, that there was a degree of personal envy or jealousy on the part of Indira Gandhi towards the Rajmata. When the Emergency was imposed, the Rajmata was arrested and imprisoned for nineteen long months. The novel describes her suffering in jail with great sympathy, noting that "Mrs. Gandhi showed no mercy to her." The Rajmata's fault, as the novel explains, was that she had left the Congress party and joined the Jan Sangh and placed two powerful women on opposite sides of the political divide. Historically, Gayatri Devi was indeed arrested under COFEPOSA during the Emergency and was held in Tihar Jail. She had won a record-breaking election victory from the Jaipur constituency. The novel presents her political career in a concise manner. It shows her contesting the election on Nehru's request, winning by more than two and a half lakh votes and later joining the Jan Sangh.

These events broadly correspond with the historical career of Gayatri Devi, although Sharma rearranges and compresses some events for the purpose of the narrative. What the novel gets right is the underlying tension between Gayatri Devi and Indira Gandhi. Khushwant Singh, who knew the family, recorded that the rivalry between the two women ran deep and personal, and contemporary press coverage described Gayatri Devi's presence in Parliament as a standing irritant to the Prime Minister (The Quint). The parallel Sharma draws is between royal dignity and democratic brutality. How a system that claims to represent the people can crush even the most respected figures when power is threatened.

Maneka Gandhi and the Surya Magazine Episode

Sharma devotes an entire chapter to the turbulent story of Maneka Gandhi (referred to as "Menaka" in the novel), the wife of Sanjay Gandhi. The novel traces the key events with considerable fidelity: Sanjay Gandhi's passion for flying aeroplanes and his establishment of Maruti Udyog in Haryana with the help of Chief Minister Bansi Lal; his marriage to Maneka and his decision to engage her as the editor of the magazine Surya.

The novel accurately notes that Maneka had no prior experience in the publishing business. The magazine failed to turn a profit and incurred heavy losses. By the time this came to Sanjay Gandhi's knowledge, the damage was done. Sharma writes that "Mrs. Indira Gandhi failed to tolerate this scenario" and differences arose between Maneka and her mother-in-law. The sudden death of Sanjay Gandhi in a plane crash (June 1980) is depicted as a turning point. After his death, Maneka found no encouragement to continue publishing Surya. The novel then describes the growing rift between Maneka and Indira Gandhi as "Two kings don't exist in the same kingdom". The rift continues with Maneka's eventual departure from the Gandhi household and her joining of the BJP, where she won a parliamentary seat from Pilibhit. Historical accounts by writers like Khushwant Singh, who was close to the Nehru-Gandhi family, have corroborated many of these details. These details are also documented in multiple family biographies, including Sagarika Ghose's *Indira: India's Most Powerful Prime Minister*.

Literary Theories

The Anna Hazare Anti-Corruption Movement and the Rise of AAP

One of the most significant modern political episodes covered in the novel is the Anna Hazare movement of 2011 and the subsequent birth of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Sharma sets the stage by first describing Baba Ramdev's failed agitation against black money in 2010, where the yoga guru organized a dharna at Ramlila Maidan demanding that all black money be brought back from Swiss banks.

The police ultimately dispersed his supporters and Baba Ramdev famously fled in women's clothes. This detail, often treated as folklore, is in fact well recorded in contemporary and later press coverage, including footage that has resurfaced repeatedly in Indian political commentary. The following year, Anna Hazare as described by Sharma "a dead honest soldier" and a Gandhian activist from a village in Maharashtra arrived at Ramlila Maidan and galvanized the nation with his demand for a Jan Lokpal Bill. The novel correctly identifies the key figures who supported this movement: Advocate Prashant Bhushan, who prepared the charter of demands; Kiran Bedi, the former police officer; Manish Sisodia; Dr. Kumar Vishwas; Shazia Ilmi; Yogendra Yadav; and most importantly, Arvind Kejriwal, an IIT Kharagpur graduate and former Indian Revenue Service officer. Sharma describes how the movement received 24-hour media coverage, with people sitting on dharnas in several cities across the country. He states that the BJP and the RSS indirectly backed the movement to challenge the UPA government under Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi.

The novel then traces the formation of the Aam Aadmi Party. Arvind Kejriwal and his associates like Kumar Vishwas, Manish Sisodia and others formed a new political party that emerged directly from the anti-corruption movement. The party established itself as a formidable force called "Parivartan" (meaning "change"), functioning initially as an NGO before transforming into a political entity. But the novel does not shy away from the darker turn of events. Sharma describes the liquor license scam that engulfed AAP. Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia was arrested and the novel notes that the Chief Justice of India himself asked pointed questions about the alleged scam money — "Where is the amount of two thousand crores? Who gave it and to whom was it given?" (Sharma, 106) This liquor-policy controversy that the novel folds into its account of AAP's later years is also grounded in fact. The most powerful parallel in this episode is power corrupts everyone. A party born from an anti-corruption movement allegedly becomes corrupt itself. Sharma traces this pattern through history. From kings who promised justice but delivered tyranny, to modern democrats who promise reform but deliver the same old politics. Lord Acton's famous dictum, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely," echoes through this section of the novel without being directly quoted.

The Naveen Jindal Episode and Journalist Ethics

Chapter 18 of the novel deals with the theme of journalistic corruption through the story of Naveen Jindal, described as a Member of Parliament from Kurukshetra and the head of the Jindal Group of Industries, which is involved in coal and steel. The novel also mentions Jindal University, highlighting Jindal's contributions to education alongside his industrial empire.

The episode Sharma narrates involves a group of four journalists who attempt to extort money from Jindal by threatening to publish damaging stories about his coal business like allegations of selling allotted coal blocks in the open market, tax evasion, poor working conditions for laborers and environmental violations. The journalists demand three crore rupees to suppress these stories. However, Jindal had anticipated such a visit and had installed hidden CCTV cameras in his meeting room. The entire conversation was recorded. When the journalists refused to settle for less than three crores, police officers entered the room and arrested them. The recording served as evidence of their extortion attempt.

This episode as narrated in the novel closely mirrors reported incidents involving industrialists and journalists in India. In 2012, Zee News journalists including Sudhir Chaudhary were arrested after a complaint by Naveen Jindal's firm alleging attempted extortion in connection with coal-block coverage. Sharma's scene compresses and dramatizes such cases for narrative effect. The specific dialogue is fictional, but the underlying facts like industrialists recording journalists who attempt to extort money, police arrests and subsequent trials are drawn from documented events.

The novelist uses this episode to make a broader point. The press, which is supposed to be the fourth pillar of democracy, is itself susceptible to corruption. "Not all journalists are always sincere in their approach to national issues," the novel observes, "and often misuse and misinterpret the event." (Sharma, 94)

The Rise of Narendra Modi and BJP's Political Evolution

Perhaps the most significant historical thread in the novel is the evolution of the BJP and the rise of Narendra Modi. Sharma traces this story from its origin. It notes that the BJP emerged from the Jan Sangh (earlier known as Bharatiya Jan Sangh) and was ideologically rooted in the RSS, with its headquarters in Nagpur. The novel identifies Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani as the two foundational figures of the BJP, who together shaped the party from 1980 onwards. They were joined by stalwarts like Murli Manohar Joshi, Yashwant Sinha and others. Advani served as the mentor and ideological guide while Vajpayee became the moderate, poetic face of the party.

The Gujarat 2002 Riots and Vajpayee's "Raj Dharma" Remark

When Narendra Modi became the Chief Minister of Gujarat, the novel describes how communal riots broke out in February 2002. The immediate trigger was a fire in a train compartment in Godhra. The reaction to this incident was devastating. Riots broke out across Gujarat and a large number of Muslims were killed, their shops burned and women assaulted. The novel notes that Amit Shah served as the Home Minister of Gujarat during this period. Sharma writes that the situation became international news and that the BJP's handling of the crisis was widely criticized.

Prime Minister Vajpayee personally visited Gujarat in April 2002 to assess the situation. In a press conference that became one of the defining moments of his political career, Vajpayee publicly told Modi that he had not fulfilled his "Raj Dharma" — his duty as a ruler to protect all citizens regardless of religion. The novel captures this moment as "So far, the CM was the apple of Vajpayee's eyes and now the PM wanted the CM to step down." (Sharma, 62) But L.K. Advani came forward to protect Modi by arguing that removing the Chief Minister would only worsen the situation and succeeded.

This is one of the most widely documented moments in post-2000 Indian politics. Historian Christophe Jaffrelot examines this episode in detail in *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. The trouble began on February 27, 2002, when a train fire in Godhra killed fifty-nine Hindu activists returning from Ayodhya. Modi, then newly sworn in as chief minister, visited Godhra that same day and went on television to call the incident a planned attack. Jaffrelot notes that this directly contradicted what the local district magistrate had said only hours earlier. The next day, Modi told the Gujarati press that Godhra was "a one-sided collective violent act of terrorism from one community". Riots spread quickly after that statement. Ahmedabad and Godhra were hit hardest and the Gulberg Society massacre, where former MP Ehsan Jafri was killed along with dozens of others, became one of the most infamous incidents of the violence. Jaffrelot records that official figures put the death toll above 1,100, while NGO estimates went beyond 2,000. (Jaffrelot, 39-41)

What makes this account significant is how Jaffrelot links the violence to Modi's political rise, not just to the events themselves. He shows that even as criticism mounted within the BJP and Prime Minister Vajpayee privately expressed discomfort, party president Jana Krishnamurthi blamed Pakistan's intelligence agency for the riots and effectively shielded Modi from removal. (Jaffrelot, 41)

Advani Sidelined: The Aurangzeb Parallel

The novel describes how, after consolidating power in Gujarat, Modi rises to become the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate in 2014 and displaces L.K. Advani — the very man who had saved him from removal during the Gujarat crisis. This is one of the novel's most compelling historical parallels drawn between Modi's treatment of Advani and Aurangzeb's treatment of his father Shah Jahan. Just as Aurangzeb imprisoned his own father to seize the Mughal throne, Modi gradually sidelined the man who had been his political mentor by elevating him to the Margdarshak Mandal — a body without real power. The novel captures this with bitter irony: "L.K. Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and Vinay Katiyar had taken an active part in the Ayodhya Temple dispute but they were cornered and Mr. Advani was not invited to the major meetings of the party. And the BJP elevated them to a new body — the Margdarshak Mandal. What an irony!" (Sharma, 99)

This pattern of protégés overthrowing their mentors is one that Sharma traces through centuries of Indian history. From the Mughals to the modern BJP, the novel suggests, power has always consumed those who seek it and discarded those who once held it.

The Shaheen Bagh Protest

Sharma briefly refers to the Shaheen Bagh protest in Chapter 20 of the novel. He mentions it along with the farmers' protest and states that these movements could not achieve their desired political outcome. Although the reference is brief, it connects the novel with one of the most significant public movements in contemporary India.

Historically, the Shaheen Bagh protest began on 15 December 2019 after the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the police action at Jamia Millia Islamia. The protest was organized mainly by Muslim women in the Shaheen Bagh area of Delhi. It was peaceful and continued day and night for several months. People from different communities, students, activists and citizens from across the country visited the protest site to express their support. Soon, similar protests emerged in many other cities, making Shaheen Bagh a national symbol of peaceful democratic resistance. The protest finally came to an end in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions, and the police cleared the protest site.

Sharma includes the Shaheen Bagh protest as part of the novel's broader political narrative. This reflects the novel's greater emphasis on political leadership, state power, and conflicts among those in authority. Through this selective treatment of historical events, Sharma shapes the narrative around his central concern with the exercise of political power and its impact on society.

Other Historical Events

Beyond the episodes examined above, *Hell for the People* touches on a number of other real events. These moments appear as a line or a short paragraph tucked inside chapters devoted to other themes, yet they are worth noting because they show how widely Sharma's historical net is cast, even where his treatment stays thin.

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (1919)

Early in the novel, Sharma briefly recounts the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, where General Dyer ordered troops to fire on an unarmed crowd gathered for Baisakhi, killing “more than 700 people.” The novel adds that Dyer “was pardoned by the British government but killed by Sikh Udham Singh in the UK” (Sharma, 13). This is where the novel makes a factual slip worth flagging for the paper. It was not General Dyer who was assassinated by Udham Singh in London in 1940, but Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab who had endorsed Dyer's actions. Dyer himself died of illness in England in 1927, thirteen years before Singh's act of retribution.

Rajiv Gandhi's Assassination (1991)

The novel also gives a condensed account of Rajiv Gandhi's political career and death which notes his introduction of computer technology, his strained relationship with the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the 1987 guard-of-honour incident in Colombo where he was struck by a soldier. It then briefly records his assassination “by a female suicide bomber” of the LTTE while campaigning in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu, in May 1991 (Sharma, 59). This sequence of events broadly matches the historical record.

The Kargil War and the Return of the Bofors Guns

In a passing aside, the novel also connects the Bofors guns bought during Rajiv Gandhi's government with the Kargil War. These guns were earlier linked to a major corruption scandal that affected his government. However, during the Kargil conflict, the same guns proved useful in attacking enemy positions at high altitudes. Sharma notes that they helped India in its victory in the war. This presents an interesting contrast between the controversy surrounding the guns and their later role in the war.

The Abrogation of Article 370 (2019)

Jammu and Kashmir's changed status also appears only as background detail rather than as a developed episode. The novel briefly lists the consequences it associates with the change: a single national flag, a new education policy and the removal of Article 370, alongside the arrest of local leaders like Farooq Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti.

Nitish Kumar and Bihar's Prohibition Policy

The novel discusses Nitish Kumar's prohibition policy in Bihar while examining alcohol bans in different Indian states. Sharma states that the ban has reduced the state's revenue by half. He also mentions that critics claim that liquor and opium continue to be smuggled into the state despite the ban. The novel, however, does not discuss the issue in detail and limits its discussion to a short section.

Conclusion

Reading Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* through the lens of neurodivergence does not replace existing interpretations but enriches and complicates them. The feminist reading remains essential: the novel is very much about the oppression of women in patriarchal Indian society. The existentialist interpretation is still relevant: the novel deeply engages with questions of solitude, meaning, and authenticity. These other approaches, however, only account for a part of the story—the neurodivergence reading adds a dimension that these other frameworks cannot fully capture—the aspect of neurological difference that shapes human experience. All these are true: Nanda Kaul's whole life of covering up and her final retreat to solitude; Raka's intense sensory engagement with the natural world and her resistance to social communication; Ila Das's vocal and social dysregulation and her tragic vulnerability—these are not merely metaphors for the condition of Indian women or the human condition at large. They are representations, however intuitive and pre-diagnostic, of neurodivergent subjectivity. Desai's genius lies in her ability to render these subjectivities from the inside, to create a prose style that enacts sensory intensity and communicative difference rather than merely describing them. The novel's final image—Raka's simple statement that she has set the forest on fire, delivered against the backdrop of Ila Das's murder—brings together the novel's neurodivergent themes in a moment of devastating convergence. The fire, with its overwhelming sensory totality, represents both the destructive potential of a world and the explosive release of subjectivities that have been compressed, suppressed, and denied. As the mountains burn, the novel's neurodivergent vision reaches its fullest expression: a world transformed by a different way of perceiving, a different way of being in the world.

On a larger scale, the theory of neurodivergence provides ample opportunities for rereading Indian English fiction where characters who are socially withdrawn, sensitively hyperactive and communicatively differently are common. Indian English literature is waiting for critical recognition of the neurodivergent subjects. This analysis could be extended to other works in Desai's oeuvre in future, such as *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) with its protagonist's highly sensitized and psychologically split world, and Baumgartner's *Bombay* (1988) that portrays social alienation and obsessive routine.

Conclusion

Vikas Sharma's *Hell for the People* stands as a significant literary work that presents Indian political history through the medium of fiction. Rather than functioning as a conventional history book, the novel combines historical events with literary techniques such as characterization, dialogue and emotional narration to make the past more engaging and meaningful. Sharma fictionalizes certain characters and situations, yet the narrative remains closely connected to historical realities. This creative approach allows him to explore political motives, human emotions and moral questions in ways that are often beyond the scope of traditional historical writing. The novel follows a chronological journey from the Mughal period to contemporary India and covers major events such as British colonial rule, the Freedom Movement, the Emergency, the rise of the BJP, the Anna Hazare movement and the Modi era. Throughout the narrative, Sharma highlights recurring patterns of power, ambition, political conflict and the suffering of ordinary people. By drawing parallels between different historical periods, he suggests that although rulers and political systems change, the misuse of power and its impact on common citizens continue to remain a constant feature of history. The central strength of *Hell for the People* lies in its ability to connect literature with political and historical discourse. The novel encourages readers to reflect critically on the relationship between power and society rather than accepting history as a simple record of events. Whether readers agree with Sharma's political interpretations or not, the novel successfully initiates discussion on governance, democracy and the experiences of ordinary people. Ultimately, *Hell For The People* presents the idea that political authority, regardless of the individual or party in power, often places the greatest burden on the common people. This makes the title of the novel a powerful reflection of its central theme.

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