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Living in the Light of Little Gandhis: Muslim Predicament and Hope in Mohinder Singh Sarna's "The Minor Gandhis"

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Abstract

This article analyses Mohinder Singh Sarna's Punjabi short story "The Minor Gandhis", a narrative that refuses the familiar grammar of partition violence and chooses instead to tell a quieter, more intimate story about the fragile but persistent ember of hope that kept alive, for India's Muslims, the possibility of staying and belonging. Set against the backdrop of riot-ridden Delhi of 1947 and Gandhi's remarkable intervention, his fast unto death that brought the violence to a sudden halt and revived the possibility of peace and communal amity, the story captures, through the ordeal of one poor Muslim woman, the existential predicament of an entire community suspended between belonging and exile. Placing the story in its historical and political context, this article argues that it is Gandhi, and the countless little or minor Gandhis inspired by him, who gave Muslims in post-partition India the confidence and assurance to continue calling India their home.

Keywords: Partition, Gandhi, Exodus, Violence, Communal Unity, Predicament of Muslims

Introduction:

The partition of India was primarily a political decision with unprecedentedly devastating social consequences, one of the greatest human tragedies in recorded history. The demand for Pakistan, put forward by a handful of Muslim leaders driven by their own anxieties and political ambitions on behalf of an entire community, had by the time it reached its conclusion poisoned the social fabric so thoroughly that centuries of carefully cultivated coexistence collapsed in an instant. People who had lived side by side for generations, bound by shared languages, shared land, and shared lives, suddenly became each other's mortal enemies just because they did not share the same religion. The Punjabi, the Bengali, the Sindhi, the Peshawari, the Hindustani, all were overnight reduced to a single, fatal identity: Hindu, Muslim, Sikh. Pakistani or Indian. The ordinary people's only crime was that one morning they found themselves on the wrong side of a line drawn to divide a country, and discovered, with no warning, that they had become strangers and homeless in their own homes and neighbourhoods. This cruel twist of fate and enforced change of identity unleashed a heart-wrenching carnage, looting, arson, merciless killings, mass rapes and abduction of women, and kilometres-long caravans of people fleeing their homes and homelands with death at their heels.

It is doubtful that any of the Muslim League's political leaders had anticipated scenes of such wrath and bloodshed, because they were consumed by the singular obsession of creating a new nation. Perhaps no one had ever paused to calculate what the consequences of that political mobilising and polarising an entire people around religion might be. The country they built in the name of their community sowed the seeds of a communal hatred whose

brunt was borne entirely by ordinary people. While in the newly formed Pakistan virtually all Hindus and Sikhs had either fled or been driven out, in India a very large Muslim population, approximately thirty-five to forty million people, chose to stay, or had at least been left with that choice, unlike the Hindus and Sikhs who found themselves stranded on the wrong side of the border with no choice at all.

This is not to say that there was no resentment or hatred against Muslims in India, that would have been unimaginable to expect otherwise. Even if Hindus and Sikhs in India had not initiated the violence, its epicentre had been Rawalpindi and other parts of the newly formed Pakistan, but it did not take long for the winds of hatred to cross the newly carved out border, and soon an equally brutal, barbaric and heart-wrenching retaliatory violence was unleashed against Muslims in divided India (Pandey; Ahmad). And yet, through all of this, one man stood alone against the storm, Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of peace and nonviolence, the only person still fighting to extinguish the fires of hatred and restore the lost brotherhood and communal harmony of a fractured nation. For Gandhi, healing the wounds of partition mattered more than celebrating the arrival of independence (Pyarelal). His was the task of taming a collective madness, a communal frenzy that had consumed an entire people. Jinnah and the Muslim League had spent their political careers branding Gandhi as anti-Muslim or as merely the leader of the Hindus, but in post-partition India, for thirty-five to forty million Muslims, Gandhi was the only hope. He was the one man who had absorbed the poison of partition, endured the hatred of his own people, and ultimately paid with his life.

Ashis Nandy aptly observes that for many years there existed a strange silence among Indians when it came to talking and writing about the journey of partition — a journey that he says "began with a massive riot in Calcutta . . . ended at the assassination of Gandhi at Delhi" (Nandy 101) This silence, Nandy claims, "is not the silence of unconscious memories; it is the silence of a secret self" (Nandy 104). That silence, of the secret self, which is also the victim self of partition, has lately been broken, explored, and documented by literary critics, researchers, and historians (Bhasin and Menon; Butalia; Das). Yet these explorations have largely been preoccupied with recording and recounting stories of endless violence, enormous bloodshed, rape, abduction, and killing. Alok Bhalla aptly critiques this overemphasis on violence and calls it tautological, because there could be no civil strife without violence, and perhaps "any encyclopaedist of terror can compile an endlessly cumulative dossier of barbarity in times of social and political turmoil" (Bhalla 3127). The best fiction writers about partition, Bhalla further announces, "are not concerned with merely telling stories of violence, but with making a profoundly troubled inquiry about the survival of our moral being in the midst of horror" (3127). This overconcentration on violence and the victim narrative has, in its own way, silenced another side of partition, one that is occasionally acknowledged but rarely dwelt upon. That is the side of hope, stories that, even in the most turbulent of times, keep alive a ray of light, restore our faith in humanity, and reassert our collective moral being and responsibility.

Mohinder Singh Sarna's Punjabi short story "The Minor Gandhis" beautifully captures the existential crisis and predicament of Muslims in post-partition India, and shows how, in that moment of profound uncertainty, Gandhi was their first and last hope. This article analyses Sarna's story, a narrative that moves beyond the familiar tropes of partition violence to tell a quieter, more intimate tale about the fragile ember of hope that kept alive, for India's Muslims, the possibility of staying and belonging. The story is set in riot-ridden Delhi of 1947, against the backdrop of Gandhi's arrival in the city and the remarkable way in which his presence and his fast brought the violence to a sudden halt, reviving the hope of peace and communal amity. Gandhi's arrival is nothing short of a lifeline for the Muslims of Delhi. With Gandhi in the background, the story is woven around a poor Muslim woman, Begama, who has been sitting anxiously in the casualty ward of Irwin Hospital for over three and a half months, waiting for her unconscious son Sadeq to recover. It is through Begama's inner turmoil and her apprehensions that Sarna most sensitively and perceptively places us inside the Muslim experience of partition. Through the story of Begama and Sadeq, Sarna attempts to render the full weight of the Muslim dilemma in post-partition India – to stay or not to stay in India, and to leave or not to leave for Pakistan. Yet like many of Sarna's

other partition stories, this too, even in the midst of carnage and diabolic times, is ultimately a story of hope and of peaceful future. This article places the story in its historical context to show how Gandhi, and the many little or minor Gandhis around him, fought for the protection and peaceful survival of Muslims in those terrifying times, and gave them the confidence and assurance to continue calling India their home.

A Humane Story of Inhuman Times

The predominant focus of partition literature has been to recount the diabolic times, the times when humanity had lost its meaning and value, when people had turned beast, and when a collective madness had made them each other's mortal enemies, destroyers of life and property. Whether it is Manto's partition stories laced with dark humour and intense satire of the maddening times, Krishna Chander's unbearably vivid descriptive tales of violence, Rajender Singh Bedi's evocative stories of women and their plight, or the poignant portrayals of partition violence and exodus by Amrita Pritam and Bhishma Sahani, everywhere one encounters a pessimistic, inhuman, and gory world. These stories have, without question, documented episodes of history and dimensions of human suffering and ordeal that would otherwise lie buried under the facts and figures of official history. In that sense they constitute an alternate history, a people's history of grief, pain, and anguish. Yet within this overarching reality of violence and madness, there exist quieter stories, less discussed, less celebrated, that restore and revive our faith in humanity even in the most savage and inhuman of times. These are not stories of death but of life, although even in these stories, the will to live and the hope of survival cannot be told without looking at death squarely in the face.

Sarna's "The Minor Gandhis" is an important addition to the tradition of partition stories of hope and life. It shows how, in a time when man had become man's enemy, when even the closest of bonds were being severed by extreme sorrow and darkness, there were still some who remained committed to the preservation of humanity. Staring intently at the heaving chest of her supine, unconscious son, Begama is transported back to the past, to the turbulent times of the riots and the attack that had left Sadeq lying here in this hospital bed for months, fighting between life and death. She recounts how, barely a month and a half after the unfurling of independent India's tricolor, Delhi had been engulfed by riots, and for nearly three days Muslims had endured arson, looting, and pogrom. The mayhem finally stopped with military intervention, and the affected Muslims were moved to a camp in Tees Hazari. In a time when offering shelter to a Muslim or protecting one was to invite violence upon oneself, Begama remembers how Hakim Chiranji Lal stopped her from going to the camp and gave her family refuge in his own home. While most Muslim families in the neighbourhood moved to the camp, Begama and her family stayed back. Although Sadeq requested Hakim Sahib to let them leave and not take on this danger for their sake, Hakim categorically refused, announcing, "dangers are taken on for one's own, young man... Do you consider us outsiders?" (Sarna 113), and declared that he regarded Sadeq as no different from his own son Ram Swaroop. Hakim Sahib and Begama shared no bond of blood or faith. If there was any bond between them, it was simply that their two families had been neighbours for generations. And if there was something deeper still, it was this, that Begama had been the midwife at every one of Susheela's, Ram Swaroop's wife's, deliveries, and that Ram Swaroop and his sister Kusum had themselves been born into Begama's hands. It was a human bond, perhaps greater than the bond of blood, and perhaps that is why, Begama recollects, everyone called her "Amma."

A ray of hope pierces the dense clouds of violence, unrest, and fear, Begama remembers, when Gandhi decides to go on a fast unto death against the Delhi riots. The man with a mission to restore peace and order in times, when men were out to kill each other in frenzy and vengeance, succeeded, at least at a broader level, in bringing calm to the city as conditions begin to improve. Gandhi's efforts helped Muslims regain confidence and feel reassured about their safety, as they soon begin leaving the camp and returning to their homes. Many even resume their livelihoods. It is this renewed hope that brings Sadeq back to the streets with his fruit handcart. But fate, it seems,

had other plans. He is attacked and badly beaten by three young men, the enemies of peace and humanity, and from that fateful day to this, Begama has been praying incessantly for her son's recovery. Her ordeal did not end there. It continued for months. But so did the efforts of the defenders of peace, Hakim Sahib, his wife, and his family, and particularly his polio-stricken grandson Roshan. While Begama's daughter-in-law, worn down by the entreaties of her parents, eventually succumbs and leaves for Pakistan, Roshan, despite his own considerable challenges, makes sure that Begama never faces her ordeal alone.

The story ends against the backdrop of the darkest and most devastating day in independent India's history, the day three bullets were fired point blank into the heart of Mahatma Gandhi, the day when, as Nehru announced in his address to the nation, “The light had gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere" (Rajmohan Gandhi 653) The news of Gandhi's assassination leaves Begama benumbed and terrified. It feels to her as though her last remaining hope for peace and harmony has been brutally shattered. And then another thought courses through her entire being, raising a chilling fear, that it might have been a Muslim who committed this merciless act. What gives her a momentary relief is the knowledge that it was not a Muslim but a fanatic Hindu who had murdered the Mahatma. It is at this very moment of mourning that Sadeq regains consciousness, but only briefly. His first and last words are, "Has Gandhi ji given up his fast unto death?", and the moment he is told of Gandhi's assassination, "Sadeq's eyes shut again. He took a few difficult breaths and then his chest stopped heaving" (Sarna 119).

Sadeq's death, arriving in the same breath as the news of Gandhi's assassination, breaks Begama completely. She turns motionless, numbed by the two blows falling at once. Yet as she recovers from this emotionally devastating moment, it is not remorse but a strange sense of relief that she feels. She believes her son had done the right thing. Sadeq's last words and his final concern before death reaffirm what Begama herself feels, that "he did not want to live in a world where prophets of peace and non-violence were shot to death" (Sarna 119). It is a moment so devastating that even Begama, who had never once shown weakness, not through her husband's death, not through her son-in-law's killing in the riots, not through her daughter-in-law's departure for Pakistan, finds herself, for the first time, entertaining the thought of ending her own life. As she says, "it was no crime to commit suicide if the choice was to live in such a world" (119).

But much like other stories of hope by Sarna, the persistent believer in hope, “The Minor Gandhi” too does not end on a pessimistic or suicidal note as Begama's chain of dark and despairing thoughts is broken the moment her eyes fall on Roshan, clutching Sadeq's body and weeping inconsolably. In a flash, she sees in Roshan *roshani* (the light) of hope, sorrow suddenly gives way to recognition as she sees before her not Roshan but a minor Gandhi. One of those little Gandhis who will carry forward Gandhi's ideas, preserve them, and disseminate them long after he is gone. These thousands of minor Gandhis, she believes, will build the India of Gandhi's dreams and "give new shape to the country, to the world, to life" (119). The thought of death and suicide vanishes from Begama's mind in an instant, and the strong, resilient Begama reasserts herself, deciding not to "jump into death's darkness" but "to live in the light of minor Gandhis like Roshan" (119). To fully understand the weight of that choice, Begama's decision to live in the light of minor Gandhis rather than surrender to despair, one must turn to the historical and political context that made it so precarious and so consequential.

The Living Dead: Muslim Predicament in Post-Partition India

Begama's anguish, her paralysis, her fragile and hard-won hope are not merely the private ordeal of one woman, they are the symbolic expression of a collective Muslim predicament that was itself the direct consequence of the political decisions and their catastrophic human fallout that led to the partition of India. From the formal raising of the demand for a separate state in 1940 to the approval of the partition plan in 1947, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and his associates had one sole political agenda, to establish that Hindus and Muslims did not constitute a single

nation, that the two communities were fundamentally and irreconcilably different from each other and therefore could not live or survive together. The plan was to slice out the Muslim-majority northwestern and eastern zones of India and create Pakistan. In the political negotiations and the frenzy to execute this plan, its architects gave little if any thought to the future of the minorities, Hindus and Sikhs in the newly formed Pakistan, and Muslims in divided India. By the time their attention turned in that direction, it was too late. Their politics had already poisoned the well so thoroughly that no appeal they made could have any effect.

Addressing the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 11 August 1947, three days before its founding, Jinnah surprised everyone by raising, among the goals the new nation was to pursue, the unavoidable question of minorities in either dominion. He appealed to all to forget the past, bury the hatchet, and work together for the prosperity and progress of Pakistan irrespective of caste, creed, or religion (Ahmad 523). His call to rise above communal and religious identities and forge a Pakistani identity was admirable — but it came far too late, and it appears to have gone no further than the walls of the assembly hall. For what followed independence was not the forging of a shared identity but a crusade moving in precisely the opposite direction — not to make everyone Pakistani regardless of faith, but to make all of Pakistan Muslim. Ironically, the very leader who had just appealed for the protection of minorities presided over a nation in which minorities, Hindus and Sikhs, were either eliminated or driven out. The flames of hatred that Pakistan had lit did not take long to leap across the border. A frenzy of retaliatory violence was soon unleashed against Muslims in India as well, fuelled by the desire to avenge Hindu and Sikh suffering, and accompanied by mounting demands for Muslims to leave India and migrate to Pakistan.

Commenting on this infamously famous speech appealing for inter-communal peace and harmony and proposing a secular vision for Pakistan, Ishtiaq Ahmad claims it to be among the most controversial and confounding speeches of Jinnah. He argues that the speech was "incomprehensible to all those who had been told for years that Hindus and Muslims were two irreconcilable nations who were best kept apart" (525). Ahmad further contends that the speech was not primarily intended to offer security and assurance to the minorities already living in Pakistan. Rather, it was directed at the Indian leadership and the Muslim minority in India, because Jinnah understood that if India expelled its Muslims, Pakistan would be faced with a massive and unmanageable deluge. "It was therefore," Ahmad concludes, "badly needed to ensure the Indian government that minorities would be treated fairly in Pakistan" (525).

But unlike Pakistan, not all Muslims were driven out of India. India, in fact, remained true to the spirit of the partition plan, the very plan that Pakistani leaders ironically continued to invoke in their appeals while making no genuine efforts to honour it themselves. If Ahmad's reading of Jinnah's speech is correct, and those appeals were motivated not by any real commitment to minority rights but by the fear that India might force its thirty-five to forty million Muslims to leave for Pakistan, then the situation of Muslims remaining in India was even more precarious than it appeared. Their safety and belonging in India was not a matter of principle for Pakistan, it was a matter of Pakistani self-interest. They were, in other words, being used as a bargaining chip, their fate contingent not on justice but on the calculations of those who had created the crisis in the first place.

While the Pakistani leadership appeared to offer little more than lip service when it came the Partition Plan or to restoring peace and protecting the rights of minorities, the political leadership and civil society of India, under Gandhi's guidance, remained committed to suppressing violence, restoring peace, and reassuring minorities of their safety and their right to stay. And perhaps they did succeed, at least in part, as is evident in the fact that despite the carving out of a separate nation for Muslims, thirty-five to forty million Muslims chose to stay back in India. But in the aftermath of partition, in those inhuman and savage times, it was no simple matter to convince Muslims that India was still their country, that they had every right and authority to choose India over Pakistan, and that this choice would be honoured and protected. Their very legitimacy to remain was being questioned, their belonging contested, and their future deeply uncertain. It was in these gory and terrifying times that people like

Hakim Chiranji Lal and his family, and countless other Hindus like them, risked their own lives to protect millions of Begamas and to persuade them to stay. They may not have been able to stop the violence entirely, or to shield Begama's entire family from harm, but they shared her grief and pain as their own, did everything within their means to heal her wounds, and never stopped trying to convince her that India was still her country.

It is precisely this existential crisis and predicament of Muslims in the wake of partition that "The Minor Gandhis" so beautifully reflects through Begama's plight and struggles. Through her story, Sarna gives symbolic expression to the anxieties and dilemmas of the entire Muslim community. Sadeq's condition is itself a powerful metaphor for that predicament. Lying supine and unconscious in the casualty ward of Irwin Hospital, suspended between life and death, Sadeq metaphorically represents the condition of Muslims living as the living dead in the turbulent India of those times. Just as Sadeq can neither recover and return to life nor finally succumb to death, Muslims in post-partition India found themselves caught in an equally tormenting limbo, neither able to fully leave for Pakistan, having chosen India as their home, nor able to fully live in India, where their right to belong was being denied and their safety threatened at every turn. And just as Begama and the doctors cling to the fragile hope that some miracle will restore Sadeq to life, the Muslims of India too survived on a similarly fragile hope, that someone, somehow, would breathe new life into their claim to belong, and restore to them the dignity and security of being at home in their own country.

The Minor Gandhis: The True Defenders of Humanity

Gandhi's real power lay in his ability to communicate and connect with the people of India. Millions of Indians living across the country felt themselves connected to Gandhi, including many who may never have seen or heard him in person. In a time when the means of reaching people were limited, unlike the world we live in today, Gandhi's emergence as a pan-Indian figure was nothing short of extraordinary. His influence over the masses and the poor peasantry has been variously interpreted by scholars. Shahid Amin, for instance, argues that rumours and myths circulating among the peasantry of eastern Uttar Pradesh played a crucial role in transforming Gandhi into a Mahatma, a figure of almost supernatural and divine authority, in the popular imagination (Amin). Yet while myths and rumours may have been instrumental in building the image of Gandhi as Mahatma in certain regions, that image would have meant little without the millions of minor Gandhis he had produced, a force of constructive workers who emulated Gandhi, who embodied his ideas and ideals in their conduct and character, and who carried his vision into the everyday lives of ordinary people. If rumour built the myth, it was these little Gandhis who gave it flesh and substance. Raja Rao's Moorthy in *Kanthapura* (1938) is perhaps the most memorable literary embodiment of this figure, a minor Gandhi who brings the nationalist movement to a village, mobilizes women and the lower castes, and encourages them to practise passive resistance and satyagraha.

Gandhi wanted to create an army of Rachnatmak Karyakartas, constructive workers, who would dedicate themselves to realizing the India of his dreams. Not those seduced by the temptations of power, but those who regarded selfless service as their highest duty, who would work with commitment and conviction toward constructive goals. Gandhi's constructive programme, he believed, was the truthful and nonviolent path to winning Poorna Swaraj (M. K. Gandhi 281). And among all the items included in that programme, the most urgent and burning issue of the time, perhaps even more pressing than independence itself, was communal unity. For Gandhi, this unity was “not a political arrangement but an unbreakable unity of hearts” (M. K. Gandhi 285). The greatest challenge for the *Rachnatmak Karyakartas* was to achieve this unity — and it could only be achieved by going to the people, working at the social and personal level. Perhaps this is why Gandhi advised all Satyagrahis to "cultivate personal friendship with persons representing faiths other than his own" and to have "the same regard for the other faiths as he has for his own" (M. K. Gandhi 285).

Mohinder Singh Sarna's "The Minor Gandhis" is the story of those thousands and millions of unknown, unsung, quietly working little Gandhis who relentlessly labour for humanity and humanitarian values. In this story, whether it is Hakim Sahib, his wife Saraswati Devi, and their grandson Roshan, or the doctors who work with complete dedication and patience to revive Sadeq – people whose dedication and commitment Begama acknowledges with gratitude and reverence when she observes that "it said something for their humanity that, despite the fact that three and a half months had passed, they hadn't given up hope" (Sarna 110). And crucially, these are not Gandhians, not followers of Gandhi who merely claim allegiance to his ideals or profess commitment to his program. They are living embodiments of Gandhi himself, people who have so thoroughly internalized his conduct and his thought that they have become Gandhi. They are the ones who embody communal unity and brotherhood in the most concrete and human way possible, by offering shelter, support, and solidarity to Begama in the darkest hours of Partition.

Perhaps no literary image captures the spirit of Gandhi's *Vaishnav Jan*, those who feel the pain of others as their own, as evocatively and beautifully as Roshan clutching Sadeq's body and weeping inconsolably at his death. And perhaps no figure captures the resilience of that spirit as movingly as Begama herself, one of the millions who refuse to leave for Pakistan, who embrace Gandhi's hope of communal harmony and unity, and who believe that even after the prophet of peace and nonviolence is gone, that hope lives on, and will be fulfilled by the thousands of minor Gandhis like Roshan who carry it forward.

Conclusion:

Stories do not tell history – they contest it. They record the disappointments and hopes that official history rarely finds space for, the incidents and human moments that disappear into the footnotes of political discourse and debate. It is in these buried and overlooked layers that one finds the hope that kept humanity and collective morality alive even in the most barbaric of times. Sarna's "The Minor Gandhis" is precisely such a story, a tale of life lived in the shadow of death, of the living dead finding reasons to keep living in those violent and dreadful days. It is a story written by a storyteller who is an ardent believer in hope, one who, even in the darkest of times, seeks out and finds a ray of light. That faith in hope is what drives him to write stories like "A Defender of Humanity," "The Crusader," "Hope," "Gondlanwala," and "Jathedar Mukand Singh," to cite only a few from his large and remarkable collection of partition stories *Savage Harvest: Stories of Partition* (2013). It is hope, and not violence, that is the central and defining trope running across the majority of his partition stories, as he himself declares, "I did not lose faith even when faced by the barbarity of Partition. My Partition stories pass knee-deep through the dark quicksand of blood and crushed bone, but they keep their head, on which they carry their bundle of hope, clearly above the quicksand. This hope is kept intact even in the whirlwinds of barbarity and brutality" (Mohinder Singh Sarna, qtd. in Navtej Sarna xiii).

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