

## Violation Of Human Rights - The Woes Of Minority Community In Rohinton Mistry's Such A Long Journey

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### ABSTRACT

The paper showcases the problems faced by the minority community – The Parsis living in a secular country, India. Rohinton Mistry depicts the woes and worries, burdens and troubles experienced by this minority community owing to corruption. When corruption rules, basic human rights and liberties come under threat as corruption affects civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of a person. The protagonist Gustad's long journey in a cold and malevolent world in which all forms of happiness and misery are inseparably woven is the journey of an ethnic group on the verge of extinction still fighting for their rights.

**Key words** Marginalisation, minority, Parsis, corruption & rights

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* compares the doomed life of Gustad Nobel who stands for the minority community, against the socio-political tensions of the 70s that tumbled the fortunes of many an Indian. The novel highlights the famous Nagarwala case that involved the lead Bank of the country-the State Bank of India dispersing six million rupees based on a phone call supposedly from the then Prime Minister of the country, Indira Gandhi. The very nature of the act gives rise to several suspicions and is reflective of the politico-economic situation of the country in the seventies. The clerk of the bank himself goes on to disclose the disbursement to the police after handing the money at the appointed place to Mr Nagarwala, who upon arrest confessed that he had mimicked Indira Gandhi's voice. That Nagarwala later died under suspicious circumstances leading to an abrupt closure of the trial is reflective of the fraudulent political practices widely prevalent in the country under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. Though not a surprise, even the high-ranking civil servant who was appointed to investigate the case too had died in a traffic accident on a god forsaken road in New Delhi. The whole issue continues to remain a mystery to this day.

The Nagarwala incident is an interesting case to study from the point of violation of human rights as well as the vulnerability, a minority community is subjected to in a secular country This statement which forms the basis of the novel throws light on the Parsis' plight, firstly their eviction from Iran which resulted in the loss of their home, secondly the disgrace they suffered during Indira Gandhi's internal emergency and thirdly their sense of betrayal at being marginalised despite their valuable contribution to the nation building. The statement also brings into sharp focus the ruthless nature of the state mechanism in operation and shows how helpless individuals get caught un/wittingly in the vortex of political cauldron. The narrative highlights how the rights of individuals are violated in the form of corruption that is widespread in the society. The fight against corruption is central to the struggle for human rights. Corruption has always greased the wheels of exploitation and injustice which characterises our world. From ethnic cleansing to institutionalised racism, political actors have abused their entrusted powers to focus gains for the few at the cost of many. The novel figures out the existing threats to the Parsi family and community in particular and also to the country in general. The Parsi community is presented through the different characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that affect it.

The sub commission on prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities set up under Human Rights Commission, defines minorities as "those non-dominant groups in a population who possess and wish to preserve stable, ethnic, religious or linguistic traditions or characteristics from those of the rest of the population," (M.Yashasvi & SaviPrasad, 472). It is of fundamental importance that every minority is protected against discrimination and exploitation. Indian constitution and the International Legal Regime have recognised the same and accorded them a special status. But as the laws and institutions are usually under the control of the majority, who are also the authors of the dominant, political, economic and cultural ideologies and their

dominant ideas are often forced upon the minorities and the alternate ethnic, religious and linguistic traditions are suppressed.

The present-day world has seen direct ways of suppression through examples one finds in history and there is a strong world opinion prevailing against minorities. The most naked example was Hitler's Nazism which sought to provide a final solution to the problem of ethnic minority, the treatment of Aborigines in Australia and Red Indians in America are a kind of solutions in their own right. Another way to violate the human rights is in an indirect manner. The attempt is to destroy the minority institutions of culture, religion, language and ethnicity. This is done in the name of nationality by involving the slogan of "Unity in Homogeneity" as against "Unity in Diversity" (M.Yashasvi & SaviPrasad, 473). The minorities are weakened by putting them in conflict with nationality. The members of the minority community are always viewed in suspicion and they need to prove their loyalty towards the state at every step over and over again. A single act of dishonesty by any member of the community dubs the entire community as traitors, an excuse for further suppression and denial of rights for the minority as a whole. The characters in the novel *Such a Long Journey* are denied of their basic rights as they belong to an ethnic community leading to their insecure and secluded existence.

The emergence of fundamentalism and linguistic movement as the yard stick of determining national allegiance side lined the 'religious other,' 'the Muslims' and the 'cultural other,' the Parsis and similar others in the country. The Parsis' insecurity for being an ethnic minority in the country is reflected in the voice of Dinshawji, a friend of the protagonist Gustad Noble, when he talks on the nationalization of banks in the country, Dinshawji says:

Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get now the whole atmosphere has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks. (38)

Gustad Noble is of the view that nationalization of the banks is a part of Mrs. Gandhi's strategy to gain political mileage at the cost of the interest of the Parsi bankers. The idea of Indian national identity construction that relies more on the strategy of wiping out the identity of the other is meant to victimize the Parsis too. The characters in the novel, resent the Shiv Sens who pose a real threat to distinct Parsi identity. Dinshawji fears that the Shiv Sena "won't stop till they have complete Maratha Raj" (73) with their "Maratha for the Maharashtrians nonsense," (73). Talking about how the followers of the Shiv Sena abused the members of the Parsi community as "Parsi crow-eaters" (39), there by mocking the community's burial rites, Dinshawji fears that the Parsis might become "second-class citizens" (39) in the near future. The insecurity of the community because of growing fundamentalism in Mumbai is seen in Dinshawji remark: Wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have real goonda raj. All they know is to have rallies at Shivaji Park, shout slogans, make threats, and charge road names. (73)

The novel's protagonist, Gustad Noble, reflects on the community's precarious status, because of the rising communal forces:

What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America – twice as good as the white man to get half as much. (55)

Gustad sees the threat to his minority community as analogous to the situation of that of the black American. If the Shiv Sena manages to achieve its goals and puts its plan into practice, Sohrab's future in Bombay might become insecure. This reveals that Sohrab's situation is characterised by a dilemma and that his position might become dangerous if he remains in Bombay. To Gustad, the openly racist attitude towards the Parsis implies that the only way out for Sohrab is emigration. No wonder, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is seen as detrimental to the Parsis' interests. The Parsis suspicion about the so-called natural death of Feroz Gandhi, a member of their community, who was never liked by his father-in-law Nehru, is revealed in the words of Dilnavaz, wife of Gustad Noble:

That was tragic

Even today, people say Feroze's heart attack was not really a heart attack. (197)

Like Gustad, other members of the community are scared of politicians like Mrs. Gandhi whom they consider responsible for encouraging the demand for a separate Maharashtra, "How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused," (39). As a minority community, the Parsis have their little fears and anxieties.

Corruption, knavery, hypocrisy, tyranny and decay have become the order of the country that burdened the lives of the individuals especially, Parsi community in Bombay. Events like the 1948 Pakistan invasion on Kashmir, Indo-China War in 1962, Indo-Pakistan War during 1965 and 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh are woven into the narrative casting their impact on the characters.

The middle-class existence of Gustad and his family gets jolted and he gets involved in the political scandal: the sensational event known as the Nagarwala scam that rocked the Indira Gandhi Government in the wake of the Bangladesh Liberation Struggle. Gustad's friend Major Jimmy Bilmoria who 'had been like a loving brother' and almost 'a second father to [Gustad's] children' (14) is trapped by the snares of political power and corruption at higher levels.

Corruption, according to UNDP Policy Paper is the misuse of public power, office or authority for private benefit-through bribery, extortion, nepotism, speed money, influence peddling or embezzlement. All human beings have basic rights to live in a corruption free society-as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Shah Giriraj, 37-38) Corruption is very much linked to the violation of human rights when corrupt act is used as a means to violate the right or when the corrupt practice is an essential factor in the chain of events that eventually violate the human rights. By the sudden and mysterious disappearance of his intimate friend Jimmy Bilmoria, Gustad is forcibly drawn into the concatenation of events which follow. Jimmy Bilmoria is arrested on the charge of extorting sixty million rupees from the bank by impersonating Prime Minister's voice. Jimmy who works for Indira Gandhi's secret police – Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) is "entrapped in an intricate and apparently inextricable snare of difficulties," (24). On receiving a letter from Jimmy, Gustad is unwittingly drawn into a dangerous network of deception.

Gustad's friendship with Bilmoria, who "killed, trust, love respect, everything" (178) is strained because solidarity appears unreliable. In Gustad's opinion, Jimmy has violated a universal code of behaviour that confronts Gustad with a decay of values.

Further, Gustad was directed by the Prime Minister to contact the bank manager of the lead bank in the country on an emergency basis to finance the guerrillas by impersonating her voice on the telephone. The Major was forced into handling the trauma. Embezzlement of public assets also entails corruption as it is misused for unconnected purposes instead of being used for the intended. Gustad who was shaken by what he heard remarks, "Everyone knows there is corruption. But to this level? Hard to believe." (280) Bilmoria, who becomes a victim to the supremacy of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, confesses that he was used as an agent without any second thought. Much before he realises the scandal, he is arrested and kept under detention and is subjected to police torture.

The Major's statement before his death is a bleak reminder of the enormous futility of dreams that the people have inherited. "It is beyond the common man's imagination, the things being done by those in power," (280). Major Bilomoria like his real counterpart, Nagarwala dies behind the bars under vague circumstances. Mrs. Gandhi's connection with money scandal also gets reflected through Sohrab's, Gustad's son whose voice is representative of the angst of the youth, "Our wonderful Prime Minister uses RAW like a private police force to all her dirty work." (93)

By centralizing the minority Parsi community, Mistry depicts the consciousness of the community, its anxieties and aspirations, perils and problems of existence at the individual and community level and the complex issues a minority ethnic community has to negotiate in a secular country. Gustad's extensive journey in an insensitive and spiteful world in which all forms of joy and desolation are closely woven - is the journey of an ethnic group on the verge of extinction still fighting for their rights in hope.

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