



A Chronology

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| 1957 | Born to Mohinder Singh Sarna and Surjit Sarna in Jalandhar |
| 1973 | Passed out of school from St Joseph's Academy, Dehradun |
| 1974-80 | B.Com. Honours, Shriram College of Commerce; LL.B. Delhi University |
| 1980 | Joined Indian Foreign Service |
| 1982-83 | Posted Embassy of India, Moscow |
| 1984 | Married Dr Avina Sarna nee Singh |
| 1985-89 | Posted Embassy of India, Warsaw |
| 1988 | Began to publish short stories in India and UK |
| 1989-92 | Posted Embassy of India, Thimphu |
| 1991 | Publication of <i>Folk Tales of Poland</i> (Sterling) |
| 1994-97 | Counsellor, Permanent Mission of India to the UN, Geneva |
| 1997-98 | Counsellor, Embassy of India, Tehran |
| 1998-2002 | Minister/ Counsellor Embassy of India, Washington DC |
| 2002-2008 | Joint Secretary (External Publicity) & Spokesman, Ministry of External Affairs |
| 2003 | Publication of <i>We Weren't Lovers Like That</i> (Penguin India) Translated into Hindi, Arabic |
| 2003 | Publication of <i>The Book of Nanak</i> (Penguin India) Translated into Hindi, Punjabi |
| 2008 | Publication of <i>The Exile</i> (Penguin India) Translated into Hindi, Punjabi |
| 2008-2012 | Ambassador of India to Israel |
| 2011 | Publication of <i>Zafarnama</i> (Penguin India) |
| 2012 | Publication of <i>Winter Evenings</i> (Rupa) |
| 2013 | Publication of <i>Savage Harvest</i> (Rupa) |
| 2014 | Publication of <i>Indians at Herod's Gate</i> (Rupa) Translated into Hebrew, Arabic |
| 2014 -2015 | Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs |
| 2015 | Publication of <i>Second Thoughts – on Books, Writers and the Writerly Life</i> (HarperCollins) |
| 2016 | High Commissioner of India to the UK |
| 2016-2018 | Ambassador of India to the United States of America |
| 2018 | Appointed Member, Governing Council, Shriram College of Commerce |
| 2020 | Advisory Board member Kautilya School of Public Policy, GITAM University, Hyderabad; Independent Member National Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority |
| 2021 | Appointed Advisory Board member of US- India Strategic Partnership Forum |
| 2022 | Publication of <i>Crimson Spring</i> (Aleph) |
| 2022 | Visiting Scholar, All Souls College, Oxford University, UK |
| 2022 | <i>Crimson Spring</i> longlisted for JCB Award for Best Fiction |
| 2023 | <i>Crimson Spring</i> awarded the KLF award for Best Fiction of 2022 and longlisted for Dublin Literary Award |

NAVTEJ SARNA
List of Publications

Books

Fiction:

- ♦ *Crimson Spring* (Aleph) 2022 – a novel
- ♦ *We Weren't Lovers Like That* (Penguin India) 2003 – a novel
- ♦ *The Exile* (Penguin India) 2008 – a novel
- ♦ *Winter Evenings* (Rupa Rainlight) 2012 – a collection of short stories
- ♦ Several short stories published in *London Magazine* (UK) and broadcast over BBC

Non-Fiction

- ♦ *Folk Tales of Poland* (Sterling) 1991
- ♦ *The Book of Nanak* (Penguin India) 2003
- ♦ *Zafarnama* (Penguin India) 2011 – translation from Persian
- ♦ *Savage Harvest* (Rupa) 2013– translation of Partition stories from Punjabi
- ♦ *Indians at Herod's Gate – A Jerusalem Tale* (Rupa Rainlight) 2014
- ♦ *Second Thoughts – on Books, Writers and the Writerly Life* (HarperCollins) 2015

Columns, Articles and Reviews

- ♦ Have contributed widely over the last four decades to several major publications including *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Financial Times*, *The Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*, *Times of India*, *The Tribune*, *Outlook* and digital platforms like *The Quint* and *The Print*
- ♦ Contributing a monthly column on foreign policy to *The Week* Magazine since 2019
- ♦ Wrote a literary column titled Second Thoughts in *The Hindu* for seven years (2006-2013)



Sahitya Akademi

invites you to

Meet the Author

Navtej Sarna

21 April 2025





Navtej Sarna with his wife at Diwali celebrations at the White House with President Donald Trump in November 2018

Navtej Sarna's most recent book, the historical novel *Crimson Spring*, has been hailed by one reviewer as “a masterclass in historical fiction” and by another, as the work of a “writer at the top of his art.” There are good reasons for these superlatives. The novel, centred around the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, seamlessly combines fact and fiction in a perfect mix of the historical and the human. Captivating lyrical descriptions and superb characterisation embellish a meticulously researched landscape. On display for the discerning reader is the finely-honed craft of a born story-teller underpinned by the author's deep passion for the history and culture of Punjab. *Crimson Spring* brings together – perhaps for the first time in an English novel – the various historical streams flowing in early twentieth century Punjab; the result is a valuable tapestry, a cultural heirloom to be handed down to the coming generations. For, as Sarna said in an interview once: “Ink lasts longer than blood.”

That Navtej should become a writer was no surprise to anybody. Both his parents - Mohinder Singh Sarna and



With His Majesty, King Charles III

Surjit Sarna - were acclaimed Punjabi writers of prose and poetry. The love of books and the romance of words enveloped the family (Navtej's sister, Jaskiran, would also become a writer). He read voraciously and widely during his school years in Dehradun and Delhi. By the time he was at the Shriram College of Commerce in Delhi University, his interest was focussed on serious fiction, particularly the modern classics of American and English literature: authors such as Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene, P.G. Wodehouse, Ernest Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald were to leave a deep impress on him and help him find his own voice and style.

But despite his deep interest and literary upbringing, Sarna is not a writer who burst suddenly on the literary scene with a successful novel. He steadily moved up the ladder of the craft beginning his dogged writing journey with newspaper features, 'middles' and book reviews while still at University; as University correspondent for the highly popular Evening News of the *Hindustan Times* he learnt the discipline of writing pithily against deadlines.

But it was clear that writing could not be a career. Eschewing corporate jobs and the legal profession he joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1980. Besides its other attractions, a peripatetic diplomatic life held for young Navtej the promise of unexpected adventures and exposure to different cultures and landscapes: all grist for a writer's mill. He would not be disappointed. Fascinating postings, wide-ranging human engagement and travel to

unusual destinations gave him all the exposure he needed for his literary work and he absorbed it greedily. His early postings in Moscow, Poland and Bhutan would form the setting of many of his short stories.

In fact, it was in Warsaw in the late eighties that he wrote his first short story "The Masterpiece"; it was immediately picked up for broadcast over the BBC World Service; others were to follow. Sarna was greatly encouraged by Alan Ross, editor of the *London Magazine*, who published several of his short stories. These stories - the kind that are best told around the fireplace - are now included in the collection *Winter Evenings* (2012). Sharply observed and told with a compelling candour, these stories have been praised for their languorous charm and their poignant probing of the human heart. In the words of the novelist Shashi Deshpande: “Sarna's language, though never self-consciously 'poetic', is the high point of his stories, as also his ability to create a powerful impact in a few words.”

For years, Navtej Sarna followed twin vocations – constantly writing while navigating the world of high diplomacy. Even as he spent a long six years as the Foreign Office Spokesperson, walking daily the tightrope of diplomatic briefings to the media, he simultaneously set himself literary challenges, each of which would demand a refinement of his craft.

His first novel, the deeply-felt, nostalgic and evocative *We Weren't Lovers Like That* appeared to much critical acclaim

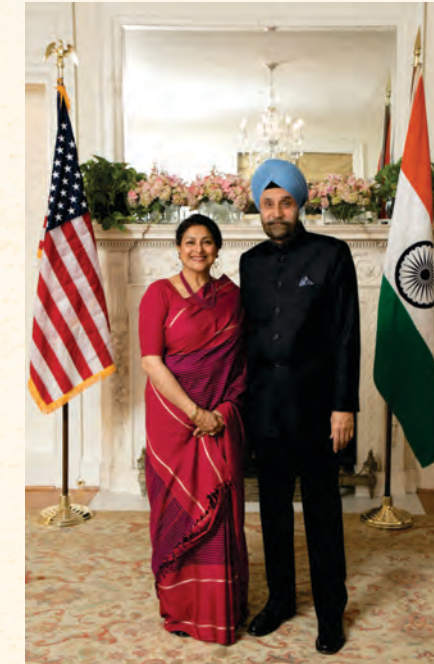


With King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan and Her Majesty Ashi Tsering Pem

in 2003. Classified by litterateur K.Satchidanandan as a “minor masterpiece of lyrical, romantic fiction,” this shimmering meditation on love and loss drew attention to Sarna's rare sensitivity, unerring eye for detail and lucid, elegant prose.

After the success of the novel, Navtej Sarna turned for further inspiration to the rich world of Punjab's history and culture, and to stories that were part of his growing up. *The Book of Nanak*, also published in 2003, set out in a simple, flowing narrative the main tenets of the teachings of Guru Nanak, making them accessible to the lay reader. Years of research went into *The Exile*, a monumental historical novel based on the tragic life of Maharaja Duleep Singh. Khushwant Singh was to describe Sarna's book, which added psychological and emotional dimensions to the story of the exiled prince, as a “dextrous mix of fact and fiction by a master storyteller that holds the reader spellbound.” This highly successful novel has played a critical role in reviving the memory of the last maharaja of Punjab, a scion of the mighty Ranjit Singh, whose destiny was blighted by colonial ambitions and conspiracies. With *The Exile*, Sarna had found his path into historical fiction and the ability to write a novel, as one reviewer remarked, “that is as true to history as can be, without shearing off the embellishments of fiction.”

More books were to follow when Sarna took up his first ambassadorial post in Israel. He was fascinated by the existence of the Indian Hospice in the



As Ambassador of India to the US with his wife Avina Sarna.

old city of Jerusalem dating back to the 12th century visit of Baba Sheikh Farid, the Sufi saint from Punjab. Sarna began a long journey into its past to uncover the whole story. The result was *Indians at Herod's Gate*, a charming and elegant tale woven together with the skills of a historian and the tools of a raconteur. The book also brought into focus the age-old relations between India and Jerusalem as well as the tale of the remarkable Ansari family, headed by Sheikh Munir Ansari, who have looked after the hospice for a century, protecting it from the troubles of a conflicted land. Largely as a result of the book, the Indian Hospice is now on the itinerary of most visitors to Jerusalem from India.

Sarna has also produced two highly ambitious works of translation. The first was a translation of the 111-verse letter titled *Zafarnama* written by Guru Gobind Singh to Aurangzeb from Persian verse to English verse. This inspired translation, undertaken by Sarna in all humility, has become the classic and oft-quoted English version of the *Zafarnama* and has served the intended purpose of bringing this historical exposition on morality in governance and war to larger, multi-lingual audiences. The other translation *Savage Harvest* is a collection of thirty classic stories on the Partition of India, written by Navtej's father Mohinder Singh Sarna, from the original Punjabi into English. These stories bring the Partition alive more than any history book can: there is violence, fear and loss but there is also compassion and always,

a tiny ray of hope.

When asked how he has managed the two demanding pursuits of writing and diplomacy, Navtej Sarna said: “I have lived the dual life of a diplomat and writer for many years now and it has become second nature. Fortunately, the two aspects of my life are not in conflict; rather they are mutually enriching. The travel, the constantly changing landscape- both physical and cultural – of diplomatic life has exposed me to much that has embellished my writing.” *Second Thoughts – on Books, Writers and the Writerly life*, the collection of the literary columns that Sarna wrote over seven years for *The Hindu* perhaps best exemplifies this synergy. About this collection fellow bibliophile Pradeep Sebastian wrote: “The breadth of Sarna's reading is infused by something else that perhaps only he can bring to it: as a high-ranking diplomat he is often physically and geographically present in the myriad locations evoked in the books he is writing aboutSarna's sojourns in the diplomatic service bring immediacy, freshness and charm to these literary pieces.”

Now, after thirty-eight years in the foreign service, Sarna's diplomatic sojourns are behind him. Even as he divides his time, along with his wife Avina, between Delhi and Mashobra in the Shimla hills, there has been no let-up in his intellectual pursuits: he remains a prolific writer, columnist and speaker in the twin spheres of international affairs and literature.



Navtej Sarna with his parents