

Gurcharan Das: Rewriting Indian History in His Works of Fiction and Dramas

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Abstract – Gurcharan Das was born in 1943 at Lyallpur, now in Pakistan, in a middle class family. His father was an engineer and he spent his early childhood in Shimla and Delhi. He completed his graduation with Honours from Harvard University in philosophy and politics. He chose the world of private entrepreneurship and quickly rose to become the CEO of Procter and Gamble, India and later Vice President and Managing Director of the same company. He took an early retirement to become a full time writer as he felt an urge to find answers to existential problems faced by contemporary human society. Gurcharan Das is a regular columnist for The Times of India and other national and international Newspapers and magazines. He is a versatile personality and has shown his remarkable talents in different genres of literature. Along with his maiden novel A Fine Family (1990), he has published three plays Larins Sahib (1968), Mira (1970) and 9 Jakhoo Hill (1996). He has to his credit many non-fictional works also such as India Unbound: From Independence to the Global Information Age (2000), The Elephant Paradigm: India Wrestles with Change (2002), The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma (2009) and India Grows at Night: A liberal case for a Strong State (2012).

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The study of history has been important to human species as it invariably leads to a greater understanding of humanity and the mistakes and misjudgments committed by it. Without history we face the danger of blindly venturing into the future and fall into trap of repeating the same mistakes. Understanding of past appears to be a universal human need which is vouchsafed by the emergence of recording of past events simultaneously in civilizations around the world. Historiography, as a specific discipline, is the method of history writing, wherein not only the object of study but even the subject comes under critical scanner. In this sense historiography is subjective record of human lives wherein seemingly objective facts of empirical observation are tinged with ideological and perceptual biases of the historian who himself is nothing more than a product of myriads of socio-cultural and economic factors.

Presently there has been a major shift away from traditional diplomatic, economic and political history toward newer approaches, which align historiography with social and cultural studies. While earlier history writing focused exclusively on war, politics and great men, history writing now is becoming diversified in different disciplines and recognizes historical importance of everyday life.

The works of Gurcharan Das are situated in the contemporary milieu wherein the writer dissects social and economic challenges faced by contemporary India. Gurcharan Das traces India's

recent social and economic transformations in his fictional as well as non-fictional works. His literary world portrays contours of a nation which is undergoing transformations in Post-Independence era. He weaves his personal experiences and stories into the larger context of contemporary India. All of his works, be it fictional or non-fictional, are analytical and present an image of India in its essentials. Regarding his consciously chosen role of a historian of contemporary India, Gurcharan Das accepts: "Now I feel that each blade of grass has its spot on earth from where it draws its life, its strength and so is man rooted to the land from where he draws his faith together with his life". (Das, Harvard Business1). His focus in his non-fiction as well as fictional works has been on socio-economic and political mapping of contemporary India in its all possible forms.

Gurcharan Das is a great votary of India with its pluralism, tolerance and freedom in his works. While contemporary India finds an explicit expression in his non-fictional works wherein he constantly emphasizes the importance of civil rights, political and economic freedom, lesser role for government and bureaucracy in a democracy and caring of the downtrodden; his dramatic and fictional works celebrate India through frequent discussions as well as through their imaginative portrayal of characters in the course of the story. Gurcharan Das' belief in liberal side of humanism which makes him vouch for women empowerment and the role of private sector in providing human dignity and enterprise to poor

people of contemporary India is part of his desire to find solutions for challenges facing India.

As a rewriter of contemporary India, Gurcharan Das traces in the incident of economic liberalization of India in 1991 a metaphor for onset of human freedom which is not limited by its economic implications. Most of the titles of the chapters in his books show how important this change from socialist pattern to liberalism is considered by Gurcharan Das which for him is a passage of India from a third world economy to a fast emerging nation. The subtitles like 'A liberal case for a strong state', 'On the Subtle Art of Dharma,' and chapters like 'A Quest for a Strong Liberal State', 'Middle Class Dignity', 'The Golden Summer of 1990s', 'Our Liberating Nineties' etc. reveal centeredness of this transformation in Gurcharan Das' works. Further, his idea of emerging India is not that of an exclusive and restrictive one, he links it with the problems of human search for a better and meaningful life. For him, to concentrate exclusively on the economic scenario of India without its cultural and religious prospects would be useless and self-defeating endeavour.

The fictional and dramatic works of Gurcharan Das exemplify liberal values as a part of narrative schemata, characterization, and thematic thrust and become topic of frequent discussions during the course of the action. The actualization of the philosophy of liberalism in Gurcharan Das is achieved both through the characterization as well as implicit motives. For example characters like Arjun in *A Fine Family*, Deepak in *9 Jakhoo Hill*, Mira in *Mira*, Larins Sahib in *Larins Sahib* reveal diverse liberal values in their life and belief. It is essential to point out here that the paradigm of liberalism in Gurcharan Das's works gives a unity and coherence to characters and themes and transcends the limitations of space and time. Every work, be it a historical play, an autobiographic novel or non-fictional work, has a unique characteristic of celebrating a distinct liberal value. Most of his works bring out diverse potentialities of liberalism such as economic growth, progress, humanism, pluralism, tolerance, importance of education and health services, equality of opportunity, transparency etc. While his Non-fictional works focus on economic liberalization, his novel and dramas emphasize virtues of tolerance, pluralism, and individual freedom of choice.

Gurcharan Das' novel *A Fine Family* (1990) celebrates the values of tolerance and liberty against bigotry propagated by communal forces during partition. Bauji, as a pragmatic realist, presents a viable path between the abstract religious position presented by traditionalists such as Seva Ram and Guruji and the fanatics of both communities. His robust reliance on senses to present him an aim in life as well his suspicion of religion makes him a champion of liberal values in life which seeks to emphasize the importance of this world as real and

livable as against the promises of after-life. The novel which is based upon Gurcharan Das' own life and career presents many characters such as Tara, Bauji, and Karan who present various liberal ideas in contradistinction to religious characters such as Seva Ram. The novel is a rich chronicle of passion and incidents of a Punjabi family. Bauji, who is a successful lawyer in Lyallpur, is forced to flee to India by the violence and instability unleashed by partition. The novel is a saga of a family striving for building a new future in difficult circumstances. In its search for a new life, the different characters find answers to their problems in a vision of life which advocates the importance of liberal values such as freedom, tolerance and avoidance of extremes. The narrative explores the impact of bigotry and fanaticism in the context of individual as well as country wherein false religiosity of Hindus and Muslims creates havoc in the lives of innumerable people. The novel reveals its suspicion of religion wherein the religious impulses lead to narrow-mindedness. Arjun, the eponymous hero of the novel is seen as a representative of liberal values whose rise in life has been possible only due to his cultivation of a liberal attitude.

"Hope lay in the private individual (like Arjun) who was liberal and educated, reaching out to the silent and the suffering and showing through his example how the liberal institutions could work." (Das. 346)

He represents the meeting point of liberal economic ambience represented by Bombay and liberal values of open-mindedness and receptivity.

"Ah Bombay! It is truly a free city. Arujun built with patience and hard work by men of trade." (Das, 249)

The novel presents the incidents, characters, institutions, middle class values, 'dharma' etc. in such a manner that it supports the liberal ideals of Gurcharan Das. Gurcharan Das draws the picture of contemporary India with its fault lines such as untouchability, dowry system, and patriarchal set up of the society and puts them against liberal world of Arjun and Mumbai. Gurcharan Das celebrates pluralism and patience which are the two main tenets of liberalism through his sympathetic portrayal of characters personifying these values as well as through the frequent discussions about the contemporary situation and incidents in the novel.

Although his three plays *Larins Sahib* (1968), *Mira* (1970) and *9 Jakhoo Hill* (1996) do not voice Gurcharan Das's economic liberalism, they present his admiration of liberal values on the human ethical, religious and social planes. While *Larins Sahib* stands for humanistic ideas of liberalism, *Mira* depicts social liberalism. *9 Jakhoo Hill*, through its presentation of rising middle class, brings to fore a conflict between traditional and new in which values such as faithfulness, love and integrity are lost. Gurcharan Das dramatizes need for liberal values

as against the rise of fanaticism, traditional outlook and pitches for a need to reevaluate the those conservative values which stunt the growth and progress of an individual and nation. *Larins Sahib* (1967) which is set in mid 19th century Punjab gives a crystal clear account of the socio-political realities of the time. The action of the play unfolds against the backdrop of political chaos and intrigue prevalent after the demise of King Ranjit Singh. History and power politics constitute the central theme in *Larins Sahib* which offers a comprehensive study of the period under review. The playwright tries to maintain fidelity to history and presents the historical events and complexities of the time in an objective manner. At the same time the dramatist makes the play reminiscent of the political and social situation of the sixties when the country was passing through a phase of disillusionment after the death of India's first Prime Minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. *Larins Sahib* thus becomes an imaginative reconstruction of history in the modern context wherein the dramatist conveys his censure of politics misused by narrow minded politician to promote their self-interests. The play successfully secures its place as a play of contemporary relevance wherein Larins typifies a liberal conscience which goes to ruins due to its excessive indulgence in power. Larins, particularly in his early stages, stands distinguished as a liberal who poses a contrast to other Englishmen in their rejection of India and Indians. He poses a contrast to other Englishmen in the play who believe in racial stereotypes and are not able to come out of ethnic prejudices. Larins rejects these classifications on the basis of his experiences and finds them abhorrent and chauvinistic. He is a libertine who remains free from all types of religious and cultural biasness.

The plot of *Mira* (1970) is woven around the story of a famous Indian saint poet Mira of 16th Century and illuminates some of the universal themes like liberalism, love, jealousy, women empowerment and loneliness. Unlike *Larins Sahib*, in *Mira*, Gurcharan Das views history in terms of religion, devotion and gender. The play dramatizes Indian philosophy and tradition with its focus on liberal ideas. Through the story of Mira, the playwright successfully explores sainthood, tolerance, freedom and their importance in Indian way of life. With his the exploration of multiple dimensions of theatricality, theme, style and form, a pattern of liberalism advocated by Gurcharan Das emerges. As against the Victorian theatre, the play explores the style of 'Total Theatre' which was an experimental theatre in the West, though it is also close to Indian traditional theatre such as Tamasha.

"Das has attempted to combine the Indian legend of Mira with the sophistication western Total Theatre in his play *Mira*" (1970), (Chatterjee, Madhuri).

The action of the play takes place in the early sixteenth century Mewar, a princely state in North Western India, and the action is replete with songs

and dances. Mira, as a bhakti saint, is connected with the liberal period of Indian history wherein the values such as compassion, love, freedom of human soul and tolerance advocated by different saints under Bhakti movement flourished. Bhakti saints such as Kabir, Namdev and Guru Nanak championed the preciousness of human soul in its freedom from religious bigotry and thus presented a humanitarian ideal against the intolerance of times. At the same time they advocated freedom of worship from the ritual based religious mysteries of the organized religions and thus championed a middle path of individual choice against the dogmatic paths championed by their more rigid co-religionists.

"Saints come naturally to Indians, and one of the reasons certainly is the influence of Bhakti poets like Mira. I grew up in bhakti-filled atmosphere.... In my twenties I began to question what it meant to be a saint and this led me to write Mira." (Das, 10)

The play also focuses on the larger questions of women rights and subjectivity against the patriarchal control of their bodies which is again a liberal position. This championing of the cause of the women in patriarchal set up of the society may be taken as an important aspect of the play through which the interest of Gurcharan Das in liberal ideas is shown. As a woman, Mira spurns her familial life and obligations in order to uphold her individuality. Mira, who was a princess of the Rathore clan of Merta in Rajasthan, openly flouts the norms of patriarchal society that demands chastity and obedience in women.

Actress I: He has to love me, for me to give him a son. A single lamp, no matter how bright, always casts a shadow. Put another one beside it and the darkness of both disappears. (Das, 107)

By portraying Mira as a woman who subverts the traditional ideals of Indian womanhood, Gurcharan Das seems to be advocating feminists' search for equal rights and status in the contemporary Indian society.

9 Jakhoo Hill, which is set in Shimla during the Diwali of 1962, exhibits onset of economic liberalism in Indian society through its portrayal of rising middle class of India.

"The political turmoil and disillusionment of the outside world, India's demoralizing war with china, the gradual decline of Nehruvian ideals and optimism are echoed in the sitting room of *9 Jadhoo Hill* where once well to do family watches in incomprehension as its genteel world disintegrates in the face of a brash new social climbing middle class". (The Hindu)

The play is about changing social order which affects the Indian society socially and economically

in the aftermath of freedom of India. In the play Anusuya and her family belong to the old aristocratic class while Deepak and her mother Chitra represent new ethos of industrial society. Though, historically, the liberal era on Indian political and economic landscape picked up momentum after 1990's, it had its root in the first inkling of industrialization during 1960s and 70s in which the play is set. The play depicts the story of the two migrated families from Lahore to India after partition and the colonial hangover in its decadence and narrowness. This vision of a lost world is pitted against the ambition and greed of a new class of entrepreneurs, which with all its faults is forward looking and optimistic of opportunities. Deepak, a successful executive in a company in Bombay, represents Indian middle class youth which believes in doing things practically and with great enthusiasm. He echoes certain beliefs of the writer himself in his faith in liberal ideas of modern economy. Deepak of *9 Jakhoo Hill*, along with Arjun of *A Fine Family*, constitutes vision of Gurcharan Das's economic liberalization. The play, which is a study of effects of changing economy on human relationships and presents declining social and moral values in Indian society, poses some relevant liberal ideas about economic and society. It emphasizes a critical balance between economic upliftment and maintenance of social and moral values which is one of the basic liberal value advocated by Gurcharan Das.

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